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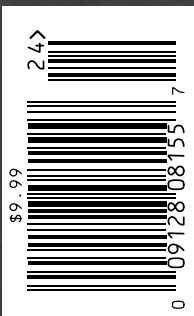
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THE WEEK

■ Might we recommend carrier pigeons?

■ **Donald Trump has struggled** to navigate the issue of abortion on the campaign trail, alternately courting pro-lifers and accusing them of dragging down the GOP. But as a Florida resident, he will be voting on an upcoming referendum to overturn the state's six-week abortion ban and to institute an abortion right that extends throughout pregnancy. At the end of August, he said he opposed the six-week ban and would vote accordingly—which implied a yes vote. Pro-life and socially conservative activists, even some who had ignored or excused previous Trump provocations, were white-hot in outrage. Trump then said he would vote no on the referendum because it is too sweeping. This subplot in the 2024 race demonstrates, among other things, that conservatives shouldn't be shy about telling Trump where he has gone wrong.

■ **Taylor Swift is the biggest** global celebrity going. Her long "Eras" tour is expected to reap over \$4 billion in ticket sales, merchandise, and other revenue sources. The attention she commands can shut down city blocks. Through her romance with a football player, she has even colonized the NFL—perhaps her only true financial rival in the entertainment industry. Minutes after the debate between Kamala Harris and Trump, Swift let the world know she was with Harris and Walz. She has endorsed Democrats in previous elections. Swift has always made it clear that social liberalism is her top political priority. Her endorsements come with plugs for



abortion, statements about the importance of diversity, and solidarity with the LGBTQIA+ community. On the plus side, her endorsement did not invoke any of the hysteria that some Democrats attach to this election, and she implicitly extended at least some respect to those of opposing views, encouraging others to do their own research and make their own choices. No such respect was returned by Trump, who fired back on social media, "I hate Taylor Swift." He thus justified the press in giving the endorsement more attention. We're a long way from the Lincoln-Douglas debates.

■ **On August 26**, Trump and his campaign team paid a visit to Arlington National Cemetery. His staffers got into an altercation with a cemetery employee, a woman who said that the team was not obeying the rules. Later, the Army, which runs the cemetery, defended the woman robustly. Chris LaCivita, a senior adviser to Trump, called her "a despicable individual." Campaign spokesman Steven Cheung said she was "clearly suffering a mental-health episode." Moreover, he suggested that the campaign had video that would demonstrate the employee's guilt. All right. It has been several weeks. Where is it?

■ **"The [whale's] head** looks a sort of reproachfully at him, with an 'Et tu Brute!' expression." So wrote Herman Melville in the 65th chapter of *Moby-Dick*, not knowing that, over a century and a half hence, a former presidential candidate would be investigated by the National ▶

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Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration for beheading a dead whale as if he were the *Pequod's* Stubb and then disposing of said traditionally subaquatic cranium in New York City. Needless to say, the episode, of course involving Robert F. Kennedy Jr., is farcical in its details but, with decades having elapsed, does not merit prosecution. The federal government should let sleeping whales lie.

■ **Tucker Carlson**—who spoke prominently at the Republican National Convention, advises Trump's campaign, and was scheduled to appear on stage with J. D. Vance—has made himself famous in recent years for “just asking questions.” Carlson hosted revisionist-history podcaster Darryl Cooper on his interview show on Twitter/X, saying he “may be the best and most honest popular historian” in America. Cooper went on to expound his view that Winston Churchill was the “chief villain” of the Second World War, primarily because the British leader rejected Adolf Hitler's peace feelers and kept Britain fighting the Nazi tyranny even after the fall of France. And Churchill, wouldn't you know, was motivated to fight Germany not to protect British liberty but because he was a “psychopath” and perhaps even bought off by Zionist financiers. After an uproar, Cooper produced a long, rambling tweetstorm in which he insisted that Hitler had only wanted peace with Britain and “an acceptable solution to the Jewish problem.” The interview has rocketed Cooper's formerly obscure podcast to the top of the charts. Is Carlson off his rocker, seeking the viewership of those who are, or both? Just asking.

■ **Bowing to the inevitable**, Hunter Biden pleaded guilty as jury selection was set to begin in his criminal tax trial. The gun case on which a jury found Hunter guilty in the spring was his problem. The tax case was a problem for the White House and, derivatively, the Harris campaign because it involved the younger Biden's failure to pay his “fair share” (\$1.4 million) of the money he raked in peddling his father's political influence. This being the Bidens, deceit continued to the bitter end. Hunter sought to plead guilty to all charges and end the debacle, but also to maintain his innocence—a so-called Alford plea. It should not have been permitted here since the evidence of knowing guilt is overwhelming. Hunter made so many admissions under oath in questioning by Judge Mark Scarsi that the innocence claim is a joke. Look for a pardon shortly after November 5.

■ **Attorney General Merrick Garland** announced an indictment against two Russians in Russia, alleging

Is Carlson off his rocker, seeking the viewership of those who are, or both? Just asking.

that they failed to register as foreign agents in running propaganda websites. The point was not prosecution, as the defendants will never see the inside of an American courtroom. It was to portray as Putin puppets the conservative commentators, including pro-Trumpers, who were (unwittingly, they say) paid by the Russians. Concurrently, the Department of Justice announced that it was shutting down Russian websites. The department further issued a complaint charging six Hamas leaders—three dead, three unreachable—with terrorism conspiracy . . . another case that can never be tried but that enabled Harris and Biden to pose as anti-jihadist scourges of Iran. For good measure, the department seized the airplane of Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro—again, there will be no trial, but a pleading whitewashes the Biden-Harris record of freeing Maduro from the shackles Trump had imposed. They may as well put a “Harris for President” banner on the front of the building.

■ **In a letter** to Representative Jim Jordan (R., Ohio), Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg apologized for his company's acquiescence to the censorship that the Biden administration requested during the heady days of Covid-19. “I believe the government pressure was wrong,” Zuckerberg wrote. “I regret that we were not more outspoken about it.” As Zuckerberg confirmed, the Biden White House “repeatedly pressured” Facebook and Instagram to remove “certain COVID-19 content including humor and satire” and “expressed a lot of frustration” when it refused. Hoping to reassure the public, Zuckerberg vowed that Meta was “ready to push back if something like this happens again.” But the proof of that is in the doing. Back when Meta made its mistake, Zuckerberg and his employees were being accused of murder, genocide, human sacrifice, and deadly “misinformation.” It's easy to stand up for free expression in quiet times; the challenge comes when the arrows are still in the air.

■ **Mike Gallagher is the kind** of politician the Republican Party, or any party, should prize: bright, earnest, conscientious, etc. For seven years, he served as an intelligence officer in the Marine Corps. He was twice deployed to Iraq. A conservative Republican from Wisconsin, he served four terms in the U.S. House, or just short of that. He resigned last April. He had been the chairman of the Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, a committee devoted to an extremely important subject. He stayed in Congress just long enough to vote for aid to Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan. He bowed out at age 39. Why? Gallagher has talked to David Ignatius of the *Washington Post*, in a series of interviews. The long and the short of it: the threat of violence—against him and his family—from people angered at his deviations from a Trump line. There is a sickness in our politics, one that the decisions to depart by Gallagher and his like will only worsen. ►

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■ **It is hardly surprising** that ABC News moderator David Muir was tougher in fact-checking Donald Trump than Kamala Harris. As for Muir’s mid-debate interjection that, “as you know, the FBI says overall violent crime is coming down in this country”: The FBI crime statistics have had serious gaps in their collection of data in recent years—omitting Miami-Dade County, New York City, and Los Angeles in 2021, and never collecting data from 2,000 (often much smaller) jurisdictions even in the best recent year. Just a few days after the debate, the National Crime Victimization Survey released its figures for 2023. The NCVS is a useful tool, because while the more widely discussed FBI crime figures count only crimes reported to the police, the NCVS surveys around 240,000 Americans about whether they were victims of reported or unreported crime. In 2023, 22.5 out of every 1,000 Americans over age eleven was the victim of a nonfatal violent crime. That is only slightly lower than the 2022 rate of 23.5. A decline of one-tenth of 1 percent is nothing to celebrate.

■ **“As president, I will get rid of the unnecessary degree requirements for federal jobs, to increase jobs for folks without a four-year degree, understanding that requiring a certain degree does not necessarily talk about one’s skills,”** Kamala Harris said at a rally in Pennsylvania. That’s a good policy, one she is copying from governors of both parties, who have already removed degree requirements from many state-government jobs. But Harris needs to follow her logic all the way through. If a college degree “does not necessarily talk about one’s skills,” that means there is something seriously wrong with college degrees, which are supposed to certify that their holders have acquired certain skills. Instead, she wants to use taxpayer money to cover the debts of people who already acquired those degrees, and to use more taxpayer money to subsidize more people to get more of them.

■ **Democrats wanted to raise \$200 billion of revenue over ten years from their \$80 billion expansion of the IRS.** Earlier in the legislative process, the White House was hoping for \$400 billion. A Treasury analysis from May 2021 determined that \$700 billion was possible. A Treasury analysis, from this year, of what actually passed determined that, if expanded and implemented better, \$851 billion was doable. Back during the Build Back Better debate, some congressional Democrats thought they could get \$1 trillion. Two years after the so-called Inflation Reduction Act gave the IRS the \$80 billion, the Treasury announced with great satisfaction that, by targeting wealthy taxpayers, it had so far recovered a little over \$1 billion in unpaid taxes. Only \$199 billion—\$99 billion to go!

■ **In *Securities and Exchange Commission v. Jarkesy*** earlier this year, the Supreme Court ruled that the constitutional guarantee of the right to trial by jury still counts in administrative cases. Now, a different agency with similarly structured in-house tribunals, the National Labor Relations Board, has been the target of an injunction from a federal judge applying the precedent from *Jarkesy*. Democrats’ vision for ▶

THE STAT

35 percent—how much the payroll-tax rate would have to be raised to fully fund Social Security, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

Social Security is funded by the payroll tax, which is currently 12.4 percent of taxable earnings, and by the income tax paid on Social Security benefits. In its 2024 long-term projections for Social Security, the CBO finds that revenue for Social Security will remain stable for the next 75 years, at around 4.5 percent of GDP. That means that Social Security revenue is projected to grow at roughly the same rate as the economy. (This would not be true if Donald Trump gets his wish to eliminate the income tax on Social Security benefits. The CBO projects that payroll-tax revenue will decline as a share of the economy but that the loss will be offset by a relative increase in income-tax revenue from beneficiaries.) The reason for Social Security’s long-term deficit is the increase in outlays, which are projected to rise from 5.1 to 6.7 percent of GDP over the next 75 years. (This increase would be even greater if Kamala Harris gets her wish to expand Social Security benefits.) The old-age trust fund will be exhausted in fiscal year 2034, after which benefits would need to be cut by 23 percent if the program is to be limited by the revenue it takes in. To have enough revenue to pay out benefits as promised, Congress would, the CBO estimates, have to raise the payroll-tax rate from 12.4 percent to 16.7 percent, a 35 percent increase. It would have to do so now and keep the rate that high forever if the program is to break even. Would you rather fork over that money to the government or invest it in your own retirement account?

by Dominic Pino

Popular CoQ10 Pills Leave Millions Suffering

Could this newly-discovered brain fuel solve America's worsening memory crisis?

PALM BEACH, FLORIDA — Millions of Americans take the supplement known as CoQ10. It's the coenzyme that supercharges the "energy factories" in your cells known as *mitochondria*. But there's a serious flaw that's leaving millions unsatisfied.

As you age, your mitochondria break down and fail to produce energy. In a revealing study, a team of researchers showed that 95 percent of the mitochondria in a 90-year-old man were damaged, compared to almost no damage in the mitochondria of a 5-year-old.

Taking CoQ10 alone is not enough to solve this problem. Because as powerful as CoQ10 is, there's one critical thing it fails to do: it can't create new mitochondria to replace the ones you lost.

And that's bad news for Americans all over the country. The loss of cellular energy is a problem for the memory concerns people face as they get older.

"We had no way of replacing lost mitochondria until a recent discovery changed everything," says Dr. Al Sears, founder and medical director of the Sears Institute for Anti-Aging Medicine in Palm Beach, Florida. "Researchers discovered the only nutrient known to modern science that has the power to trigger the growth of new mitochondria."

Why Taking CoQ10 is Not Enough

Dr. Sears explains, "This new discovery is so powerful, it can multiply your mitochondria by 55 percent in just a few weeks. That's the equivalent of restoring decades of lost brain power."

This exciting nutrient — called PQQ (*pyrroloquinoline quinone*) — is the driving force behind a revolution in aging. When paired with CoQ10, this dynamic duo has the power to reverse the age-related memory losses you may have thought were beyond your control.

Dr. Sears pioneered a new formula — called **Ultra Accel Q** — that combines both CoQ10 and PQQ to support maximum cellular energy and the normal growth of new mitochondria. **Ultra Accel Q** is the first of its kind to address both problems and is already creating huge demand.

In fact, demand has been so overwhelming that inventories repeatedly sell out. But a closer look at **Ultra Accel Q** reveals there are good reasons why sales are booming.

Science Confirms the Many Benefits of PQQ

The medical journal *Biochemical Pharmacology* reports that PQQ is up to 5,000 times more efficient in sustaining energy production than common antioxidants. With the ability to keep every cell in your body operating at full strength, **Ultra Accel Q** delivers more than just added brain power and a faster memory.

People feel more energetic, more alert, and don't need naps in the afternoon. The boost in cellular energy generates more power to your heart, lungs, muscles, and more.

"With the PQQ in **Ultra Accel**, I have energy I never thought possible at my age," says Colleen K., one of Dr. Sears's patients. "I'm in my 70s but feel 40 again. I think clearly, move with real energy and sleep like a baby."

The response has been overwhelmingly positive, and Dr. Sears receives countless emails from his patients and readers. "My patients tell me they feel better than they have in years. This is ideal for people who are feeling old and run down, or for those who feel more forgetful. It surprises many that you can add healthy and productive years to your life simply by taking **Ultra Accel Q** every day."

You may have seen Dr. Sears on television or read one of his 12 best-selling books. Or you may have seen him speak at the 2016 WPBF 25 Health and Wellness Festival in South Florida, featuring Dr. Oz and special guest Suzanne Somers. Thousands of people attended Dr. Sears's lecture on anti-aging breakthroughs and waited in line for hours during his book signing at the event.

Will Ultra Accel Q Multiply Your Energy?

Ultra Accel Q is turning everything we thought we knew about youthful energy on its head. Especially for people over age 50. In less than 30 seconds every morning, you can harness the power of this breakthrough discovery to restore peak energy and your "spark for life."

So, if you've noticed less energy as you've gotten older, and you want an easy way to reclaim your youthful edge, this new opportunity will feel like blessed relief.

The secret is the "energy multiplying" molecule that activates a dormant gene in your body that declines with age, which then instructs your cells to pump out fresh energy from the inside-out. This growth of



MEMORY-BUILDING SENSATION: Top doctors are now recommending new **Ultra Accel Q** because it restores decades of lost brain power without a doctor's visit.

new "energy factories" in your cells is called mitochondrial biogenesis.

Instead of falling victim to that afternoon slump, you enjoy sharp-as-a-tack focus, memory, and concentration from sunup to sundown. And you get more done in a day than most do in a week. Regardless of how exhausting the world is now.

Dr. Sears reports, "The most rewarding aspect of practicing medicine is watching my patients get the joy back in their lives. **Ultra Accel Q** sends a wake-up call to every cell in their bodies... And they actually feel young again."

And his patients agree. "I noticed a difference within a few days," says Jerry from Ft. Pierce, Florida. "My endurance has almost doubled, and I feel it mentally, too. There's a clarity and sense of well-being in my life that I've never experienced before."

How To Get Ultra Accel Q

This is the official nationwide release of **Ultra Accel Q** in the United States. And so, the company is offering a special discount supply to anyone who calls during the official launch.

An Order Hotline has been set up for local readers to call. This gives everyone an equal chance to try **Ultra Accel Q**. And your order is backed up by a no-hassle, 90-day money back guarantee. No questions asked.

Starting at 7:00 AM today, the discount offer will be available for a limited time only. All you have to do is call TOLL FREE 1-888-747-5911 right now and use promo code **NRUAQ1024** to secure your own supply.

Important: Due to **Ultra Accel Q** recent media exposure, phone lines are often busy. If you call and do not immediately get through, please be patient and call back.

the agency is that every case is an auto-win for unions. They have sought to use the NLRB to overturn union losses in representation elections, eliminate the right for workers to demand a secret-ballot election in the first place, and suppress the speech of employers. For actual illegal labor practices, there's a wonderful thing called a federal court, with rules of evidence, a presumption of innocence, and the right to a trial by jury. It is slower than the NLRB and less biased against employers—and that's why it's better.

■ **The U.S. Navy's personnel shortages** are now hampering its ability to repair its ships at sea, according to a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report. The report found that 63 percent of executive officers surveyed said that insufficient staffing made it “moderately to extremely difficult to complete repairs while underway.” The GAO highlighted inaccurate guidelines and substandard training as contributing factors. Many sailors in engineering departments also have little practical maintenance experience before reaching the fleet, with computer-based training substituted for hands-on work and with the hope that an experienced sailor will train the initiate once he reaches his first ship. Combine inexperience with tool scarcity, the growing time required to retrieve work authorizations and hazmats, and the churn of sailors to and from the ships, and the U.S. Navy finds itself up a creek.

■ **American families don't like** the blue-state way of life. Since 2004, they have preferred “expansive red states” to “expensive blue states.” That trend has continued and somewhat accelerated, according to a new study by the Institute for Family Studies. Families are leading an exodus out of blue states including New York, California, Oregon, Washington, Illinois, and Massachusetts. They are headed for Idaho, Montana, South Carolina, South Dakota, Florida, and Texas. Families seem to be lured by cheaper land, leading to cheaper housing, not by subsidies. Red states offer lower taxes and sometimes no state income tax, stronger job growth, and increasingly laws that protect children from progressive educational fads. The trend was also driven by pandemic-era movements that brought kids to schools that were open and maskless. What families want from the state is not more paternalism, but freedom.

■ **Two progressive Denver** nonprofits, ViVe Wellness and Organization Papagayo, have moved thousands of Venezuelan migrants, some of whom belong to the violent street gang Tren de Aragua, into run-down apartments in nearby Aurora. According to an email

obtained by NR, the nonprofits chose specific apartment complexes because they were poorly managed—no safety inspections, no vetting of tenants, leniency on maximum occupancies—which suggests that the do-gooders behind the migrant-relocation program were aware the new tenants might be disruptive. And they were right: A former tenant told NR that the apartments fell into chaos after the new arrivals: trash everywhere, drug dealing, loud noise through the night. Local politicians, including Governor Jared Polis (D.), have attributed the residents' concerns to right-wing fearmongering. Yet crimes and citations have more than doubled at two of the apartment complexes since 2022, while nearly doubling at a third complex. Tren de Aragua now uses formally vacant units to host “parties” where they “serve drugs and child prostitution,” according to a CBS report. What started as a humanitarian project to help Venezuelans improve their circumstances has descended into disorder, depravity—and progressive blindness.

■ **Chicago mayor Brandon Johnson's** plan to discontinue use of ShotSpotter has been in the works since he took office, and he's not about to change course because of an inconvenient report from his police force. The report found that, in the last eight months, police made 451 arrests tied to alerts from the gunshot-detection tool. In 20 percent of the cases, the absence of any corresponding 911 call indicates that the alerts led to arrests that would not have otherwise happened. Alerts also led to the recovery of 470 guns that had been obtained or used illegally. Police aided 143 shooting victims after receiving ShotSpotter alerts. The very same people who claim to prioritize the preservation of black life above all else are now stripping police of a powerful tool for saving those, and other, lives.

■ **For years, New York governor Kathy Hochul** (D.) failed to recognize that she was being manipulated by an aide who took directions from the Chinese consulate general in New York City. After the federal government brought charges against the former aide, Linda Sun, Hochul did one thing right: She called on the State Department to expel China's consul general, Huang Ping, from the U.S. After a few vague comments from State, the dust settled. State and the Chinese claim that Huang is expected to return to China shortly, but only because his term in this post wrapped up. He should have faced expulsion. Court filings by the Department of Justice indicate that Huang personally coordinated Sun's activities and, through her, got Hochul and former governor Andrew Cuomo to back Beijing on various issues. In 2023, the diplomatic office was also named in the case of a Massachusetts man who harassed pro-democracy advocates and in the indictment of individuals who set up an illegal Chinese-government police station in Manhattan. State Department officials twiddled their thumbs as their colleagues at Justice moved to protect Americans facing Communist China's repression. Once again, Foggy Bottom has met our low expectations.

■ **In a divisive** presidential campaign, bipartisanship might seem like a relief, but it often leads to bad policies. The Biden administration, with the support of Harris, is taking the same position as Trump and Vance by seeking to block the acquisition of U.S. Steel by Nippon Steel. These pols are blocking investment in the American workforce ►

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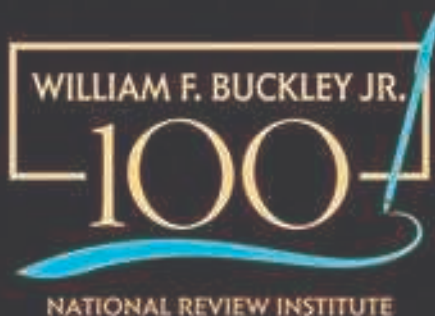
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by a company in Japan: America's No. 1 source of foreign direct investment, a country whose prime minister addressed Congress this year, and a stalwart ally against China. U.S. Steel has said that, without the investment, it will likely cut jobs and possibly move its headquarters out of Pittsburgh. Nippon Steel is probably overpaying for U.S. Steel and has promised even more investment in the U.S. than it had initially offered to appease the politicians opposed to it. The people who own both companies, their shareholders (they are both publicly traded), approved the merger almost unanimously. It's a medium-sized merger deal that would have never attracted much attention, except that it's an election year, and politicians think that blocking it will help them win Pennsylvania. Who will stand up for the forgotten workers when they're laid off in a non-election year?

■ **In Hong Kong**, two journalists have been convicted of sedition. They are Chung Pui-kuen and Patrick Lam. Theirs are the first such convictions since China took over in 1997. Chu Kai-pong is involved in another deplorable "first." He is the first person to be convicted of sedition for wearing a T-shirt—a T-shirt with a pro-democracy slogan on it. Yes, Hong Kong was killed off in 2020 (thereabouts). This killing off is old news. But we should still look in on the corpse now and then.

■ **By the beginning of September**, Israel Defense Forces were closing in on well-defended Hamas positions in Rafah. The assault had been delayed as the Biden administration did everything within its power to dissuade the Israelis from mounting a large-scale incursion into that town in the Gaza Strip. But with Rafah's civilian population now temporarily relocated, the IDF began bearing down on the tunnel network where it (correctly) believed that Hamas was keeping many of the hostages taken on October 7, 2023. As the IDF closed in, the terrorists executed a directive, promulgated following the liberation of some hostages over the summer, by killing six of the civilians they were holding, including U.S. citizen Hersh Goldberg-Polin. The Biden White House seems disinclined to impose any consequences on Hamas for this atrocity. Indeed, it has redoubled its efforts to secure a cease-fire deal, undeterred by Hamas's rejection of many peace overtures. As of September 1, Hamas was still holding 97 hostages, not all of them alive, of the 251 it took on 10/7. Israelis face a terrible choice now, between the safety of their citizens in Hamas's hands and foreclosing on the prospect of future 10/7s. But at least Israel is making a choice. The Biden White House, by contrast, appears content to dither and hope.

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■ **You have to hand it** to the Israeli intelligence services. In July, officials in Hezbollah, the Iranian terrorist proxy based in Lebanon, told Reuters that they had resorted to using lower-technology communications, like pagers, to evade "Israel's electronic eavesdropping." This came as no news to the Israelis. According to several media reports, the Israeli spy agency Mossad successfully intercepted those pagers during the manufacturing process and planted a small quantity of the high-explosive PETN in each unit. On September 17, those pagers detonated simultaneously, killing at least eleven Hezbollah fighters and commanders and injuring more than 4,000 across Lebanon and Syria. At press time, reports were circulating that Hezbollah-issued "walkie-talkie" radios were exploding around the country in what appears to be a second round of the affair. This spectacular operation is just the latest Israeli intelligence coup since the outset of the war. Israeli intelligence penetration of Iran and its vassals in the region is so thorough that it may be staying Iran's hand. The regime had promised retaliation for the July 31 bombing of a Tehran diplomatic facility that killed Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh but never delivered. And this operation may just be the opening salvo in Israel's long-delayed pivot to the north, where Israeli citizens were forced to evacuate their homes under Hezbollah fire after the 10/7 attacks and have not yet returned.

■ **The House Foreign Affairs Committee** released the conclusions of its multi-year probe into Joe Biden's disastrous Afghanistan withdrawal. Biden and his allies have long maintained that the framework hammered out between the Trump administration and the Taliban tied their hands. But the report demonstrates that the administration did not feel at all bound by that agreement. Not only did the Biden administration amend its terms, often on the fly and sometimes without the Taliban's input, but its members regarded the agreement as "immaterial" (quoting State Department spokesman Ned Price) to Biden's commitment to full U.S. withdrawal. The State Department's point man on Afghanistan, Dean Thompson, "could not recall if his bureau ever offered an assessment of whether the Taliban was meeting their commitments under the Doha Agreement." Trump did not force the Biden administration to withdraw U.S. soldiers before U.S. civilians, abandon the Bagram air base, or rely on the Taliban for security around Kabul's airport. The administration contends that the massacre of 13 American soldiers at Abbey Gate could not be prevented, but that's not true either. If the withdrawal plan, such as it was, had been scrapped, they might still be alive today.

■ **Mexico's incoming president**, Claudia Sheinbaum, is a leftist and the protégé of outgoing president Andrés Manuel López Obrador. With Sheinbaum's enthusiastic approval, AMLO rammed through a sweeping change to Mexico's government, making 1,600 federal judicial posts

It ought to be the policy of the United States to keep as much of the internet's core infrastructure under American control as possible. Nobody else will stand up for free speech.

elected offices, including those on the Supreme Court of Justice. Ryan Berg, director of the Americas program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, explains that “Mexico’s checks and balances” are “being weakened to the point of practical elimination.” In at least five ways, AMLO’s reforms appear to violate the U.S.–Mexico–Canada Agreement. They make judicial decisions vulnerable to political influence and donor interests, ban GMOs, ban fracking, dismantle several independent agencies and transfer their functions to the executive branch, and favor Mexican entities over U.S. and Canadian firms with respect to water use. President Biden’s ambassador to Mexico, former Colorado senator Ken Salazar, was slow to criticize the AMLO proposals and a year ago defended AMLO’s widely rejected claims that Mexico’s 2006 presidential election was rigged. Mexico is becoming more autocratic, and the Biden administration is asleep at the wheel.

■ **One might assume** that if a club boasted Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, Pakistan, and Venezuela as members, the rest of the world’s countries would do anything possible to avoid joining it. Alas, in the case of Brazil, one would assume wrong. The country’s supreme court, with the support of socialist president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, banned X, formerly Twitter, from the country, joining that club of despots. This, from the second-most populous country in the Western Hemisphere, should serve as a warning. The U.S. Congress should pass a law that mandates the disclosure of all content-moderation requests that the executive branch makes of social-media networks in the United States and should deny, as well, that any federal agency enjoys the power to determine for others what is and is not “misinformation” online. Simultaneously, it ought to be the policy of the United States to keep as much of the internet’s core infrastructure under American control as possible. Nobody else will stand up for free speech.

■ **As excuses for sitting out** the 2024 presidential election go, “I was stuck in space” is a doozy. And for two American astronauts, Barry “Butch” Wilmore and Sunita Williams, that excuse has the benefit of being indisputably true. To great embarrassment, Boeing has acknowledged that the problems with its Starliner capsule are so severe that Wilmore and Williams cannot return from the International Space Station (ISS) before February. Until then, the Earth for them will be a tantalizing view from the window. The problem with Starliner lies in its thrusters, which, per a series of tests conducted on the ground, pose an unacceptable risk of failure on the journey back home. Back when NASA had a monopoly on space travel, an issue such as this would potentially have been disastrous. But, under NASA’s Commercial Crew Program, a backup provider was earmarked for precisely this eventuality. That backup? None other than Elon Musk’s SpaceX, which will send a Crew Dragon capsule up to the ISS next year to rescue the pair from their

isolation. Although not being on this planet for the election doesn’t sound so bad.

■ **A 135-step flight** in Rome—known as the Spanish Steps—connects the Piazza di Spagna to the Church of Santissima Trinità dei Monti. King Louis XV had funded the steps’ construction between 1723 and 1725. Alongside several other Roman properties historically linked to France, the grounds of the Trinità dei Monti (including the steps) have been administered by a French institution, whose practices a report by France’s Court of Audit has now critiqued. The court has since clarified that it doesn’t suggest that France should seize a section of central Rome, but Italian officials aren’t assuaged. “What would France be without Italy?” wrote Italy’s tourism minister, Daniela Santanchè. “They cannot do without our luxury, our works of art, our beauty. But now they are exaggerating. They even want to take the Spanish Steps.” The vice president of the Italian legislature’s lower chamber threatened to “send experts to the Louvre to make an updated survey of the assets stolen from Italy throughout history.” Ancient rivalries? Wait ’til the Spaniards get a whiff of this.

■ **Columbia University established** a task force on antisemitism, which interviewed almost 500 students. In its report, the task force said, “The testimonies of hundreds of Jewish and Israeli students have made clear that the University community has not treated them with the standards of civility, respect, and fairness it promises to all its students.” A co-chairman of the task force, Ester R. Fuchs, remarked, “There has been a view among some that this is not a real problem, so we thought it was important to demonstrate what is actually happening to students.” In response, dozens of Columbia faculty signed an open letter criticizing the report. “We write as Jewish faculty,” they began. The report “contributes to a hostile narrative about Columbia,” they said. It “is marked by conspicuous neglectful omissions of context and climate.” It “conflates feelings with facts.” For her part, Fuchs said she was “gobsmacked” by the letter. “It’s just sad, and it’s tragic for students on this campus to have a group of faculty dismiss their experiences as just feelings.” Needless to say, this happens in few other contexts at elite universities.

■ **The Foundation** for Individual Rights and Expression keeps a running tally of colleges and universities that have, à la the University of Chicago’s Kalven Report, adopted a position of institutional neutrality on politics. Published by a faculty committee amid the fervor of 1967, the Chicago report declared that a university is “the home and sponsor of critics” but it is “not itself the critic,” and that it must “maintain an independence from political fashions, passions, and pressures.” ▶

A self-evident principle of higher ed? FIRE lists only 22 institutions that have adopted it. As of September, the august score or so includes Washington State University, the University of Wisconsin system, and the University of Pennsylvania. (The latter's statement of neutrality was announced by interim president J. Larry Jameson, successor of Liz Magill—who resigned, in late 2023, a few days after she had testified disappointingly before Congress regarding the resurgence of antisemitism on her campus.) Ideally, such declarations would be unnecessary. In these nonideal days, they're imperative.

■ **In the second inning** at Fenway Park on June 26, catcher Danny Jansen of the Toronto Blue Jays fouled off a pitch, in the rain. Strike one. The umpire called a delay. The grounds crew covered the infield with a tarp. After 108 minutes, rain still falling, the Red Sox announced that the rest of the game was postponed to August. Meanwhile, Jansen was traded to Boston. When the game resumed there on August 26, he was behind the plate again, this time for the home team, when his at-bat for the visiting Jays was completed by a pinch hitter. In that moment, Jansen made history, becoming the first man ever to play for both teams in the same major-league game. An authenticator was there to tag his equipment, including a jersey he sent to Cooperstown. The Hall of Fame requested the official scorecard. "It has to be kind of like the perfect storm for that to happen," said Red Sox manager Alex Cora, marveling at the improbability. "Starting with the storm."

■ **One of the outstanding voices** of our age did not speak at all, for a time. James Earl Jones was born in Mississippi in 1931. Abandoned first by his father and then by his mother, he was raised by his grandparents on a Michigan farm. He stammered and stuttered for a while and then went mute altogether. As an actor, he would become one of the most famous of voices. He was the voice of Darth Vader in the *Star Wars* series, and the voice of Mufasa in *The Lion King*. He acted onstage and on-screen in an amazing variety of roles, from Shakespeare on down. He was a man of grace: Sometimes confused with James Earl Ray, the assassin of Martin Luther King, he was understanding and forgiving. The great James Earl Jones has died at 93. R.I.P.

POLITICS

Dismal Prospects

On September 10, Kamala Harris and Donald Trump held their first and very likely last presidential debate.

Harris is not Daniel Webster. She is not even Nancy Pelosi. But she stuck to scripted answers and did not embarrass herself as Joe Biden did in his debate (and being 59, not 81, helped her). Trump had to fight the undertow of ABC, the debate's host, whose fact-checkers combed his responses for howlers while leaving Harris alone. (Perhaps her most egregious misstatement: She said that no American troops were currently in combat zones, even though several thousand are stationed in the Middle East.) Trump might have evaded the fact-checkers by spewing fewer fictions, e.g., that he lost the 2020 race on a "technicality." He would certainly have done better if he had bothered to learn a few facts to bolster his lines of attack: numbers of illegal immigrants allowed into the country on Biden's and Harris's watch, rather than stories about pet-eating. So much for all the advance buzz about Tulsi Gabbard being a great debate preparer, although trying to teach Trump to change his freewheeling ways is a hopeless assignment.

Then on September 15, Trump was targeted yet again by an assassin. Ryan Routh, a resident of Hawaii with a long rap sheet in his native North Carolina, was spotted with a rifle in the bushes alongside a Trump-owned golf course in West Palm Beach, only 300 yards from where the former president was playing. Trump's security shot at Routh and chased him, and police finally caught him. Thank God for that.

Rhetorical volleys soon followed, left-wing pundits and Trump blaming each other's heated language for the attempts on his life. The fact is that crackpots take the law into their own hands without prompting. The Secret Service, twice shamed, must do a better job protecting office-seekers and -holders.

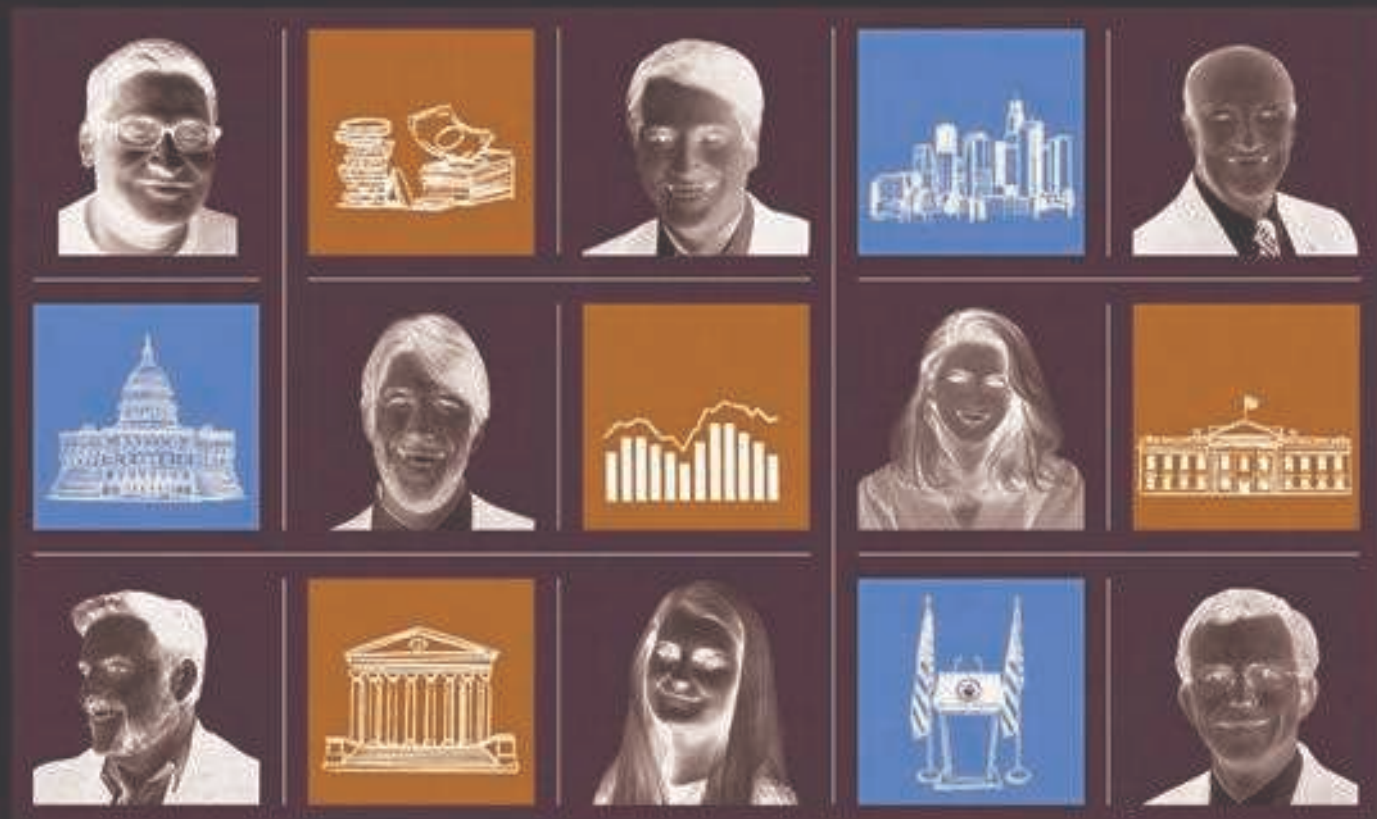
Trump is running a campaign of emotions and gestures, many of them rancid. At an Arizona rally he called Harris a "communist." That demeans the heroism of those who fought communism and degrades the memory of its millions of victims. He surrounds himself with a menagerie of boobs and goblins: notably Laura Loomer, an unintelligent racist (she said a Harris White House would smell of curry). Running mate Senator J. D. Vance accused Mike Pence of wanting thermonuclear war with Russia.

Trump himself charged that Haitians in Springfield, Ohio, were eating residents' pets. Yes, the town of 60,000 is experiencing serious strains from thousands of foreign newcomers. Yes, Haitian culture is tainted by voodoo and poverty. That is no doubt why many Haitians want to leave the island. A responsible critic of the Biden-Harris runaway influx would not shy from complexities or stoke hatred. That would require thought and charity, both rare acquaintances for Trump.

The Cheneys, father and daughter, announced that they were voting for Kamala Harris. Dick Cheney in his announcement said that Trump "tried to steal the last election using lies and violence to keep himself in power after the voters had rejected him." That is true and damning. Neither Cheney, however, explained why Harris was worthy of support. She offers a raft of bad policies, from Bidenesque dither in support of Israel to a destructive and unadministrable tax on unrealized capital gains. Some deep-seated insecurity makes her a woeful spokesperson. Her party's intention to term-limit sitting Supreme Court justices recalls FDR's attempted war on the judicial branch, and belies any argument for her based on the Constitution.

It is a sad election when the average voter is more serious than any one the major parties have picked.

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The Long View

THE JOE ROGAN EXPERIENCE

#2207

GUEST: HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS, BISHOP OF ROME, VICAR OF JESUS CHRIST, SUCCESSOR OF THE PRINCE OF THE APOSTLES, SUPREME PONTIFF OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH, PRIMATE OF ITALY, ARCHBISHOP AND METROPOLITAN OF THE ROMAN PROVINCE, SOVEREIGN OF THE VATICAN CITY STATE, SERVANT OF THE SERVANTS OF GOD

OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT

[00:00:02]

JOE ROGAN: And we're up. Hi, Pope Francis. What do I call you? Your Grace? Your Eminence?

POPE FRANCIS: "Grace" is for a bishop. "Eminence" is for a cardinal. I'm the pope. You can just call me "Your Holiness," or "Holy Father." It's really not a whole thing with me.

ROGAN: Your English is very good. Is that, like, from school or work or Duolingo or something?

FRANCIS: I grew up in Argentina. Lotta English people there.

ROGAN: Right. Got it. So people are saying to me that you're a lot more liberal, that you're opening up the church to a lot of stuff. And you just endorsed Kamala Harris for president.

FRANCIS: I did not endorse. I am told I need to be very clear on that, because of American tax regulations.

ROGAN: You guys pay no taxes, is that right?

FRANCIS: Something like that. It's all very complicated. The point is, I didn't endorse. I merely suggested that the voters choose the lesser of two evils.

ROGAN: Which is her?

FRANCIS: Joe, I am not going to take the bait. But I will say who it's not. It's not RFK Jr.

ROGAN: Which is weird, because of the whole Kennedy Catholic angle, am I right?

FRANCIS: Very different kind of Kennedy these days, to be honest.

ROGAN: So, what's with the gays?

FRANCIS: No problem with them at all. At all. Some of my best friends, as a matter of fact.

ROGAN: I'd have thought all of your best friends.

FRANCIS: Look, Joe, I'm trying to open up the church a little bit. I'm trying to appeal to the younger folk, not be so dogmatic. I mean, I'm here, right? When was the last time a pope appeared on a podcast?

ROGAN: That's a good question. But here's where I am. I'm basically Catholic. My mom was Irish and my dad was Italian—

FRANCIS: I got news for you, son. An Irish mom and an Italian dad makes you way more than basically Catholic.

ROGAN: Okay, right, but there's a lot of stuff I really can't get behind.

FRANCIS: Give us a chance, Joe. Like what?

ROGAN: The whole sin situation. The no-sex-outside-marriage thing. What the Holy Spirit is. That kind of stuff.

FRANCIS: That's all? That's easy stuff. Sin we sort of did away with a few years ago. I signed a thing and did that wax seal on it with my pinkie ring and it's basically not an issue anymore.

ROGAN: I didn't hear any of that.

FRANCIS: The media never report the good stuff we do.

ROGAN: That's true.

FRANCIS: And the sex rules I am chipping away at. You have to go slow with that stuff or there's pushback and a major financial headache, but I think in a few years we'll be in a place that a person like you, and your listeners, will feel really good about.

ROGAN: That's nice to hear!

FRANCIS: I know, right?

ROGAN: Okay, so what about the Holy Spirit? The Trinity? What's that whole thing?

FRANCIS: I honestly can't help you with that one. It is what it is.

ROGAN: So that's staying? No change on that in the future? Because it's really confusing.

FRANCIS: Tell me about it. But for the time being, certainly, we're going to stick with the Triune God. Lotta history and tradition wrapped up in that, and there's nothing I can do about it at this time. But I think, as we all grow and change, there's a chance we could see some incorporation of some of the wonderful indigenous faith traditions into that dusty old chestnut, you know? I'm thinking maybe something more along the lines of Kokopelli the trickster god, or maybe even something a little more exotic, like Hanuman, the monkey god of the Hindu faith.

ROGAN: I haven't been to church in a long time, but if there was a monkey involved, I'd probably reconsider.

FRANCIS: That's the goal of this particular rebrand, Joe. We're on a journey, is what I'm trying to say.

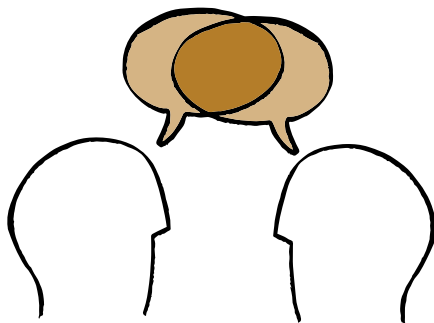
ROGAN: Here's something I've always wondered about. Do you have a morning routine?

FRANCIS: Oh, right. Yes. Joe, I'm a cold-plunge guy. And I do Vital Proteins.

ROGAN: Nice!

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Identity, White and Otherwise



Jeremy Carl

I will confess that, at first, I was a bit puzzled about how to respond to Thomas Powers’s review (September 2024) of my book, *The Unprotected Class: How Anti-White Racism Is Tearing America Apart*. I am glad that he notes (correctly) that it has been “embraced by many opinion leaders on the right, and it’s not hard to see why.” Likewise, I am pleased that he writes that I deserve readers’ “gratitude for honestly confronting this troubling dimension of contemporary life and for documenting its existence beyond any reasonable doubt.” Given that demonstrating this was by far the most important goal of my writing *The Unprotected Class*, and that it is the issue to which the vast majority of the book’s content was devoted, I was at first tempted to just declare victory and be done with it.

However, Powers then proceeds to devote almost the entirety of his review not to expanding on this praise or further analyzing my central contention but to attacking my views on topics that are ultimately peripheral to my book’s plainly stated core purpose, and on which he strongly disagrees with me. That he chooses to do so illuminates fundamental arguments in how the Right should handle sensitive questions of race. There, Powers seems radically out of step not just with me but with almost every one of the hundreds of other readers and professional reviewers who have left a public review of my book.

The Unprotected Class is not written primarily for fire-breathers—indeed, I wrote it quite intentionally for those whom I would consider typical NATIONAL REVIEW readers, perhaps skeptical of the recent turn of the GOP but aware nonetheless that something is amiss in our racial politics and looking for a serious analysis of the

situation that offers a way forward. It is a book written to convince the undecided, not preach to the choir.

Powers points out the importance of speaking carefully about sensitive issues regarding race, but there is a difference between care and cowardice.

Powers writes that my book “calls on whites to see themselves as victims,” and yet in numerous interviews about the book I have explicitly said exactly the opposite. One can extensively document a wrong being done to a group, as I have done, while choosing to focus on claiming one’s equal rights as a citizen rather than one’s status as a victim. This is more broadly important because Powers’s strategy—in which elaborating a problem is immediately equated to “being a victim”—means there is no way to realistically discuss injustices. If someone whose relative is murdered writes a book about the murder and suggests ways that we could stop future murders, is he simply “portraying himself as a victim”?

I do agree that whites should “politically organize” and “speak up unapologetically for their own rights,” but I make it clear on multiple occasions in *The Unprotected Class* that they should do so not in the name of racial tribalism but in order to vindicate their equal rights, which all Americans are owed. I explicitly invoke Martin Luther King Jr. to argue that they should do this in conjunction with allies of other races. While MLK has come under criticism by some on the right in recent years, pursuing such an MLK strategy could hardly be called extremist, dangerous, or outside of American political traditions.

I do talk about America currently being “a systematically anti-white environment” and discuss the importance of “the destruction of cultural symbols,” among several other provocative phrases that Powers unearths—but I offer extensive evidence for my claims in my book. Powers simply presents them out of context in an attempt to shock the reader, as if they were conjured from thin air. I’d urge anyone reading this to read my book and decide for himself whether these claims are well supported. ▶

Finally, and most important, because it directly falsifies Powers's thesis, I do indeed, as Powers himself notes, believe that white progressives "are the most powerful and most uniquely toxic group in American society" and that they must be "confronted, exposed, and shamed." The toxic white Left is so important in setting America's racial dynamic that it will be the subject of my next book. One can, of course, agree or disagree with that statement, but explicitly casting the white Left as the principal villain in America's race-relations drama is the opposite of a racialist narrative.

While Powers doesn't like my proposed solutions to tackling anti-white racism, he does not offer any of his own, other than mentioning a few ideas that I explicitly embraced in my book, such as engaging in lawfare to use existing civil-rights laws to attack anti-white discrimination and "pruning back" those same laws.

This failure to develop real political solutions is unfortunately a hallmark of Powers's work in this area. As one reviewer of his book on a similar subject noted: Powers states that "we are . . . compelled to hope' . . . that the antidiscrimination regime can be thwarted. Yet he gives no real foundation for his hope." Or as another reviewer wrote, Powers consistently underestimates the "role of political power in forcing dissenters into submission." It is this failure to grasp the nature of political power that is ultimately the fatal flaw in his arguments.

Much conservatism from the mid 20th century until the Trump era devoted itself more to abstract ideas than to power relations. James Burnham, other than William F. Buckley Jr. probably the foremost intellectual force in the founding and growth of NATIONAL REVIEW, never made this mistake and was in fact the 20th-century Right's foremost student of the role of power in politics; but too few on the right have followed his example, and as a result, much of the Right's rhetoric on race is simply a matter of wishful thinking rather than a serious analysis of the Left's motivations and incentives.

Powers's excess of caution is particularly stunning because he works in Kenosha, Wis., arguably the center of recent anti-white activity in America, all of which arose directly from white timidity. Rather than unapologetically defend the correct conduct of the white Kenosha police officer in shooting violent felon Jacob Blake, local officials dithered, enabling subsequent riots. When Kyle Rittenhouse joined a group of local citizens attempting to restore order and tragically was forced to shoot rioters in self-defense, local officials gave in to racial blackmail and charged him with a crime despite clear video evidence showing his innocence. When Rittenhouse's correct acquittal likely motivated Darrell Brooks's murderous attack on the Waukesha Christmas parade, which killed six and injured dozens more, including numerous children, local officials seemed more interested in temporary calm than permanent justice.

If Powers raised his voice in public forums when these events were happening in response to these deadly anti-white racial provocations, I can find no evidence of it. Powers, of all people, should realize that appeasement always fails, and this applies even more to domestic adversaries than to foreign ones. This lack of moral clarity (in which he was joined by several local GOP establishment figures) was cowardice masquerading as high principle. The Left

ruthlessly exploited the Right's weakness, leading to far more racial violence, disorder, and anger than would have resulted had officials simply issued a robust and unapologetic response from the first.

The problem with Powers's preferred strategy to combating anti-white racism is that it does not rise to the level of being political at all. It is the politics of the seminar room, not the situation room. There are two politically realistic options: one, that we have whites organize with allied non-whites to vindicate the constitutional rights that they, like all other citizens, are entitled to—and this is what I have explicitly advocated in *The Unprotected Class*—or two, that whites advocate on explicitly racial grounds in the name of white-identity politics. The latter is what Powers's preferred strategy eventually leads to, his protestations aside.

What the rise of Trump, among many other phenomena, has illustrated clearly is that there is no politically realistic option in which whites continue to acquiesce to their existing second-class legal or cultural status. The political agenda will either be seized by responsible leaders and thinkers, as I have tried to do in *The Unprotected Class*, or it will be seized by demagogues. But in no circumstances will it ever be controlled by cowards. ●

Thomas F. Powers responds:

A

gainst my claim that he advocates "a combative program of white racial grievance," Claremont Institute senior fellow Jeremy Carl now distinguishes what he says is his position, one calling on whites to "organize with allied non-whites to vindicate their constitutional rights" (good) from one in which "whites advocate on explicitly racial grounds in the name of white-identity politics" (bad). I don't think this restraint actually captures the spirit of his book, but I'll take Carl's apparently newfound appreciation for prudence in racial matters as a step in the right direction.

My general response to what he says is to ask readers to look again at my review. I provide plenty of evidence for my characterizations of his positive program of action.

Carl's angry political stance means that he throws around accusations of cowardice pretty readily. He thinks my approach to pushing back against anti-whiteness does not go far enough. But I have to wonder about his claims to courage when he does not ever raise, let alone answer, the *main* criticism that I make of his book, namely, that he encourages whites (and conservatives) to fight the anti-discrimination Left by embracing its poisonous outlook and political style. He either needs to disavow that (which would render his campaign a nullity) or own up to it and all that follows from it.

But I have to confess that Carl's book—and other fairly obvious evidence—indicates that something like a complete embrace of nasty woke politics by the Right is coming and is indeed already here. Soon all of American politics will be so dominated by the logic of the anti-discrimination revolution that there will be no other way to think about democratic life. Carl will get his way; whites will become just one more grievance group playing the divisive and acrimonious game of identity politics, cancel culture, and political correctness.

I suppose I ought to be able to accept the kind of change Carl and his many admirers foretell. In my own recent book, I make the case that an anti-discrimination “regime” has been shaping the way we think about politics and one another for a long time. My own analysis suggests that what Carl represents is the more or less inevitable product of our political order. But I also make clear that the new regime succeeds only by displacing a much superior approach to politics and group politics—that of our “liberal democratic” tradition of constitutional government. (See my review for the weakness of Carl's engagement on this plane.) Maybe the future is on Carl's side, maybe every American group will soon do nothing but clamor for respect and inclusion and

equity for itself. But that prospect is so awful that I cannot but root for liberalism, its old-fashioned wariness of faction, its low but solid standard of toleration, its separation of public and private, its wariness of legislating morality, its dedication to individual freedom—all of which goes by the board under the anti-discrimination regime.

What Americans today need is not for everybody to get in the group-grievance game. What is needed is for conservatives (it will have to be conservatives) to figure out, and then to teach, how much harm the radicalization of anti-discrimination politics has done to our democratic order and to life within it. As it is, many conservatives (not Carl, I grant) are distracted or deceive themselves, identifying the problem as anything but civil-rights politics—neo-Marxism, postmodernism, literary theory, etc. Once we are able to reckon with the shaping power of the civil-rights revolution adequately, no small task, what will then be needed is a broad program of civil-rights reform. Protecting whites from discrimination would be part of that reform. But much more important would be a comprehensive effort to tame the moralistic, hypersensitive, pedantic, and punitive character of civil-rights politics, a politics that pits Americans against one another in a dynamic of bitter mistrust and blame-casting. That is not the work of a day, and it will require not just intelligence but a certain amount of calm detachment. If that large effort of analysis, civic education, and legal reform is not attempted, we will unavoidably continue to be shaped for the future by this extremely powerful and disruptive legal and political order to the exclusion of all else.

Encouraging whites (and of course then men and Christians, too) to dive into the fray just like all the other “groups” will only hasten the day when the ugly logic of anti-discrimination politics truly takes over modern democratic life. Liberal democracy, weak already, will be well and truly dead. And then the wait for the day when a broad project of civil-rights reform might take hold will be a very long one indeed. ●

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Big Sky Brawl



The Montana Senate race is also a fight over the state's character

BY JACK BUTLER



Bozeman

If you drive west on I-90 in Montana from Bozeman to Helena, one of the least remarkable things you'll see in this vast-plained, mountain-dappled, huge-horizon land is a billboard. "Make Montana Montana Again," it reads, urging passing motorists to vote Republican. The implication is clear: Democrats have caused the state to stray from its true essence; Republicans can restore it. You don't have to look very hard, however, to find political signage with the opposite message. Yard signs for Ryan Busse, the Democratic candidate for governor, promise to "get your Montana back."

Electoral contests inevitably revolve around a state's character. But in Montana, elections can become fierce battles over the state's identity to an unusual degree. The Senate race between incumbent Democrat Jon Tester and his Republican challenger, Tim Sheehy, is a perfect example.

A trip out to Big Sky Country proves how apt Montana's nickname is. It contains a sprawling culture of political idiosyncrasy that belies the state's reliably red hue in recent presidential elections. A fiercely independent streak manifests in unique ways. Recreational marijuana has been legal since 2021; dispensaries dot its urban areas, along with casinos. Republicans and Democrats alike have resisted the implementation of the Real ID system, decrying it as federal overreach. Abortion is also complicated here: A state-level court decision in 1999 expansively legalized it, a precedent that continues to thwart legislative attempts to protect the unborn. The state is pro-entrepreneur, but memories of corporate

malfeasance have left a lingering skepticism of Big Business in some places, such as Butte, the formerly thriving mining town once labeled the "Richest Hill on Earth." The state has a "real strain of rugged populism," says Jeff Krauss, a former mayor of Bozeman. The state's residents seem largely to want to be left alone, as much as possible.

The biggest political issues in Montana are also unique. Many of them center on the state's natural endowments: federal ownership of public lands (more than a quarter of the state is federally owned), access to sites for hunting and fishing, water scarcity, forest and fire and wildlife management, restrictions on farming and ranching, and the development of natural resources such as coal and oil (part of the Bakken oil formation sits in the state). In the fourth-biggest yet third-least-densely-populated state, the condition of rural hospitals, supposedly dependent on the Medicaid expansion the state began in 2016, also ranks high on the list of issues important to voters.

Many Democratic politicians have successfully navigated this tricky terrain. Brian Schweitzer and Steve Bullock, the two governors before Greg Gianforte,

'I wouldn't say it's strictly a red state. It's maybe in many respects a conservative state, but that's not the same thing.'

the incumbent Republican, were Democrats. Democrat Max Baucus represented the state in the Senate for nearly 40 years, until 2014. It may still tilt Republican, but its college towns, unpredictable voters motivated by local issues and affected by distinct regional cultures, and other attributes can produce electoral surprises. "I wouldn't say it's strictly a red state," says Charles Steele, an economics professor at Hillsdale College who grew up in Montana and maintains a residence there. "It's maybe in many respects a conservative state, but that's not the same thing."

Montana's precise political character may be hard to pin down. Much easier to discern is the contempt of voters for what Ken, a retired stoneworker in Helena, calls "pretend politics": the attempt by people from out of state to pass as authentic residents. Accusations of carpetbagging are common in American politics. They're widespread, and frequently potent, in Montana, where they can help sink a candidacy: Representative Matt Rosendale, who unsuccessfully challenged Tester in 2018, got labeled "Maryland Matt" for having lived there until 2002. And they're tried even if they don't stick: Steve Daines, who succeeded Baucus in the Senate, was criticized for being born in California, despite moving to Montana with his family at age two.

This suspicion of out-of-staters has faced a new complication in recent years: A lot of people are moving in. Montana attracted people tired of governments that were restricting their behavior while failing to keep them and their property protected during the oddities of 2020. "It was a flight to safety and a flight to a much larger amount of freedom," Krauss says.

From 2021 to 2022, Montana nabbed a net 24,000 residents from other states, according to the U.S. Census. This migration accelerated an older trend: financially successful people from other states buying up land. Area home prices are up 42 percent since the pandemic, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. If Montana were ever a secret, the secret is now out.

Who is fit to master the politics of such a place? In recent years, few can lay a better claim to have done so than Jon Tester. Tester, now 68, in 2006 narrowly defeated compromised incumbent Republican Conrad Burns, who had the stink of Jack Abramoff on him and—perhaps more important to Montanans—had insulted a group of firefighters. Since then, in addition to Rosendale (who bowed out of the Republican Senate primary earlier this year), Tester has also defeated a challenge from former representative Denny Rehberg. As voters' tendency outside of swing states to split their tickets has diminished in recent years, Tester's endurance places him in rare company, alongside Senator Sherrod Brown (D., Ohio), also first elected in 2006, and Senator Susan Collins (R., Maine).

Tester leans heavily into his personal appeal. A third-generation Montanan from the small town of Big Sandy, he still farms the same land that his grandparents did. He butchers his own meat, undaunted by losing three of his fingers in a meat grinder when he was a child. He even still uses the same machine. ("What?! It's a good meat grinder!" he recently tweeted.) He proudly displays the same flattop haircut he has worn for decades ("\$12, plus tip," his campaign website reads). His campaign has doubled down on these appeals: He takes pride in not

looking "like most other people in Washington," and has claimed that his goal as a senator is to make "Washington look a little bit more like Montana."

He focuses intently on local issues and frames his positions on national issues in the most palatable possible manner to his constituents. He presents his views on abortion as anti-government. "If there's one thing that makes you a Montanan, it's your love of freedom," Tester said at a September rally in Bozeman with Planned Parenthood. "You don't want a politician or bureaucrat or judge telling you, especially if you're a woman, what health-care decision you're going to make." (Montanans will vote this fall on a constitutional amendment to expand abortion.) Such positioning has generally worked for him.

But there's reason to doubt it will continue to. In a less partisan, less politically nationalized past, it may have bothered people less that "he runs against himself when he comes back" to Montana, as Krauss puts it. But Tester's ties to the Biden-Harris administration are now harder for Montanans to ignore. Politically convenient and showy breaks from Democratic presidents and bills are essential for electoral anomalies such as Tester. He has supported the Keystone XL pipeline and opposed the DREAM Act and certain Biden-administration environmental regulations. Yet such moments are rare: In every tiebreaking vote Kamala Harris has had to cast as vice president, including on such controversial pieces of legislation as the so-called Inflation Reduction Act, Tester has voted with her.

Ever canny, Tester continues to finessé. Up for reelection, he started voting drastically less often with the Biden administration, according to a *FiveThirtyEight* analysis. He was one of the first Senate Democrats to call for Biden not to run for reelection and has declined to endorse in the presidential race, because "folks want to nationalize this race, and this isn't about national politics, this is about Montana." It's possible to tie him to Harris in other ways, however. In addition to voting with her, Tester, as chairman of the Democratic ▶

Though some recent arrivals have made purple and blue parts of Montana bluer, Republicans believe that others are ‘refugees, not missionaries’ from blue states.

ARTICLES

Florida Could Become an ‘Abortion Mecca’



The stakes of a state referendum are regional

BY MARK STRICHERZ

Senatorial Campaign Committee, encouraged her to run for the Senate in the first place. Tester’s seat may end up being key in a closely divided Senate: If Republicans hold their current Senate seats and win in West Virginia, the outcome in Montana would determine majority control of the chamber. Tester may not be interested in nationalized politics, but nationalized politics are interested in him. And that’s a problem for him. “Unless you’re happy with the Biden administration, I don’t see how you’re comfortable with someone like Tester,” Steele says.

Enter Tim Sheehy, Tester’s Republican challenger. Age 38, originally from Minnesota, and a wealthy businessman, Sheehy moved to Montana about a decade ago. These characteristics have inspired Tester to employ his typical tactics. His campaign refers to Sheehy as “a rich newcomer running for Montana’s Senate seat” while lambasting (and caricaturing) his views on such topics as public lands and health care. In a statement to NR, a spokesperson for Tester’s campaign called Sheehy a “multimillionaire transplant who has lied to Montanans on everything from what he believes to his own biography.” Sheehy’s campaign has made some missteps, including ill-advised leaked comments about Native Americans, and he has faced a controversy over the nature of a bullet wound. Sheehy initially claimed that a bullet lodged in his arm from an accidental discharge in Glacier National Park in 2015, but now he says he lied about this to protect fellow soldiers from investigation into the actual circumstances of the injury, incurred in Afghanistan in 2012.

Yet Sheehy confounds the Tester playbook. He may be relatively new to

the state, but he has prospered in it as the co-founder of an aerial firefighting company. He has donated to area hospitals. And he is a decorated veteran. A retired Navy SEAL, he earned a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart. There’s reason to believe that this background endears him to Montanans in a way that those of prior Tester challengers didn’t, especially in a favorable political environment. Recent polling has moved in Sheehy’s favor. “You can beat on him all you want about not being from here,” Krauss says. “But if he was sleeping in a tent in a war zone, as far as I’m concerned, that was Montana ground.” (Sheehy’s campaign declined repeated requests for an interview with the candidate.)

An irony arises in this campaign. While each candidate tries to claim the mantle of the true Montanan, each has, in a sense, succumbed to trends beyond the state. Tester’s time in Washington has weakened his claims, personal and ideological, to be a Washington outsider. And Sheehy has relied on Tester’s transformation, as well as broader political shifts, in the effort to oust him; in August, Sheehy rallied with Donald Trump. And out-of-staters may help both sides. Though some recent arrivals have made purple and blue parts of Montana bluer, Republicans believe that others are “refugees, not missionaries” from blue states, as Daines, also chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, put it. He thinks they are “moving to Montana to join us, not to change us.”

Whatever happens in November, anyone who has ever been to Montana should hope its unique character—which you can find throughout the state, even on its highways—endures. ●

On the evening of August 15, Florida governor Ron DeSantis sat in a chair onstage at Jesuit High School in Tampa beneath a message on an enormous white screen. “VOTE NO ON 4,” it said, in bold letters. “NOT WHAT IT SEEMS.”

The message referred to Amendment 4, an abortion-rights initiative on the Florida ballot this fall. The referendum, whose formal title is “Limit Government Interference in Abortion,” is billed as a commonsense measure. “The overwhelming majority of Floridians think we should all have the freedom to make our own personal health care decisions without interference from politicians,” Floridians Protecting Freedom, an alliance of abortion-rights groups, said on its website. As the message above DeSantis indicated, opponents argue that the referendum is deceptive. And according to DeSantis, its sweeping changes to abortion laws would affect not only Florida but also six southern states—Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi.

“You look at the entire Southeast region: We would be the only state that isn’t

It's a bait and switch. The referendum would do more than 'limit' governmental restrictions on abortion. It would all but eliminate them.

pro-life,” DeSantis said to the audience of 500 at the school’s auditorium. “So guess what? Everyone from the Southeast, where are they going to go? Florida is going to be a tourist destination for abortion.” Two months earlier, DeSantis warned that if Amendment 4 were approved, the state would “become the abortion mecca of this region.”

DeSantis has a stake in the outcome. In April, he signed a “heartbeat” bill into law that prohibits abortion after the sixth week of pregnancy and includes rape and incest exceptions up to 15 weeks. If Amendment 4 is approved, by all accounts the heartbeat law will be gutted. But self-interest has not sullied DeSantis’s judgment. “It’s a bait and switch,” former State Senator Kelli Stargel said in an interview. The referendum would do more than “limit” governmental restrictions on abortion. It would all but eliminate them. Despite its claims to “protect freedom” and “limit government interference,” the referendum would allow “the abortion industry to police itself,” as Peter Northcott, director of state strategies for National Right to Life, said in an interview.

Northcott’s assessment is no flight of fancy. Increasingly, the abortion industry is policing itself in Michigan and Ohio. Voters in each state approved sweeping abortion-rights initiatives in the past two years. The same groups that wrote the language for their referendums, Planned Parenthood and the ACLU, wrote the language for Amendment 4, and the similarities between the initiatives are obvious. They forbid not only “prohibitions” on abortion but also “delays” and “restrictions.” To judge from recent developments in Michigan and Ohio, Amendment 4 would gut two Florida restrictions that currently

require a woman seeking an abortion to make two in-person visits to a clinic at least 24 hours apart and provide written consent that she was informed about the procedure. If the case put forward by such groups as the Michigan chapter of the ACLU prevail, Amendment 4 would gut Florida’s parental-consent law, too.

Wiping out restrictions could well make the Sunshine State “an abortion mecca.” A doctor would be allowed to an abortion on a woman eight or nine months’ pregnant by signing a form saying the procedure was necessary to protect her “health,” a term that is undefined. Teenage girls from throughout the Southeast may be able to cross state lines into Florida to get abortions at all nine months of pregnancy without parental consent. Indeed, on its website, Planned Parenthood tells women living in Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana that “you may be able to get an abortion in other states.”

Such a scenario could hardly be more different from the rosy future that some pro-lifers saw two years ago when the Supreme Court struck down *Roe v. Wade* (1973) and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992). In *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, the high court recognized that abortion was not a constitutional right to be enforced by the courts; it was a matter to be regulated by the people and their elected representatives.

Twenty-two states put meaningful abortion restrictions on their books—limits that would have been impossible under *Roe* and *Casey*. Among the most notable was Ohio, where in 2019 lawmakers approved legislation to prohibit abortion after six weeks even in cases of rape and incest. But the ambitious law backfired.

It misjudged public opinion and, worse, underestimated its foes. Planned Parenthood and the ACLU seized on the law’s lack of exceptions for rape and incest. The groups found examples in which pregnant minors in Ohio were denied abortions even though they had been raped; wrote puffy language for a ballot initiative; and, after getting enough signatures to qualify for the ballot last fall, outspent pro-life forces by more than two to one.

Voters approved the referendum by a margin of 56.8 to 43.2 percent. Abortion-rights interest groups recognized that their strategy could be replicated, and they have replicated it in six other states besides Florida this fall—Arizona, Nevada, Missouri, Nebraska, Montana, and South Dakota.

Of those battles, the most significant is in Florida, the third-most-populous state. Abortion-rights groups have come prepared. In April, Anna Hochkammer, executive director of Florida Women’s Freedom Coalition, told *Politico* that her organization wrote Amendment 4 with an eye on Florida’s conservative tilt. “You basically have to give people who are independents and Republicans permission to agree with you on this thing, to disagree with their individual candidate or their party,” she said. “Then you have to figure out what you want to say, what you want to do. And then you have to poll it. When you have a disagreement between one noun and another noun, one verb and another verb, you really do have to spend the time and money polling these things to see whether moving a comma or changing an adverb changes what voters perceive of this language.”

Amendment 4 is only 49 words in two sentences but has three sweeping implications.

For starters, the referendum would grant a qualified right to abortion until birth. “No law shall prohibit, penalize, delay, or restrict abortion before viability,” the amendment says, “or when necessary to protect the patient’s health, as determined by the patient’s healthcare provider.”

The final clause is crucial. Post-viability abortions are permitted if a health-care provider such as an abortion doctor signs a form saying that continuing ▶

To be sure, parental-consent laws in both Ohio and Michigan remain on the books despite the two states' new abortion laws. Yet for how long?

the pregnancy poses a health risk to the woman. The term “health” is, to repeat, undefined, as is “viability.” Indeed, Hochkammer said the amendment would untether viability from the usual standard of 22 to 24 weeks of pregnancy, the time most doctors consider a human fetus capable of living outside the womb. “It’s a decision that should be made by a doctor, made by a medical team, made by a patient and her family with their health care provider and not arbitrarily defined somewhere far, far away by people who don’t understand the context of any particular situation or case,” she said. (Many media outlets dismiss the incidence of third-trimester abortions, as the procedures account for less than 1 percent of the roughly 1 million abortions in the United States each year. Even so, the figure amounts to 9,000 to 10,000 annually—roughly the same as the number of children, teens, and adults 30 years and younger who were murdered as the result of gunfire in 2022.)

Second, the referendum would likely knock down Florida’s 24-hour waiting period and informed-consent laws. After all, the requirements “delay” a woman from getting an abortion and “restrict” her from procuring one. In Michigan and Ohio, judges temporarily knocked down those restrictions already.

On June 25, Michigan Court of Appeals judge Sima Patel temporarily invalidated the state’s mandatory 24-hour waiting period for abortion and its informed-consent law. “The Court is convinced the mandatory delay exacerbates the burdens that patients experience seeking abortion care, including by increasing costs, prolonging wait times,

increasing the risk that a patient will have to disclose their decision to others, and potentially preventing a patient from having the type of abortion that they prefer,” Patel wrote.

On August 23, Franklin County judge David Young temporarily struck down both Ohio’s 24-hour-waiting-period requirement and its informed-consent law. On the latter, Judge Young approvingly quoted Dr. Sharon Liner, the medical director of Planned Parenthood’s Southwest Ohio Region. “As a health-care provider, it is my duty to obtain informed consent from patients,” she had said. “I don’t need the state to mandate this.”

Third, the referendum may even strike down Florida’s parental-consent law—a 2020 statute that requires a girl younger than 18 seeking an abortion to receive written approval from her parents or legal guardian. For one thing, Amendment 4 would invalidate any “restrict[ion] . . . before viability.” Judges are likely to view a requirement for consent as a restriction. After all, the parents could say no. For another thing, Amendment 4 refers to a “patient” rather than distinguishing between adults and minors. Finally, the referendum makes no mention of upholding the state’s parental-consent law. Instead, it says it would uphold Florida’s parental-notification law. The omission is significant. As Northcott of National Right to Life said, notifications can happen after a teen has had an abortion.

To be sure, parental-consent laws in both Ohio and Michigan remain on the books despite the two states’ new abortion laws. Yet for how long? In March, Michigan’s ACLU chapter and two other organizations released a 36-page report denouncing the state’s parental-consent law as undermining the “safety, health, and dignity of young people.”

While Ohio has not documented the effect of its law, Michigan has done so. In 2022 alone, after its pre-*Dobbs* abortion standards were upheld in court challenges, the number of out-of-state abortions in Michigan tripled to 2,000, according to Planned Parenthood. Paula Thornton Greear, the group’s director in the state, gushed that the abortion initiative was laxer than *Roe v. Wade*. “*Roe* was the floor

and not the ceiling,” she said. “Prop 3 is a wonderfully shiny, fantastic, necessary foundation that we must build upon.”

Whether Governor DeSantis and pro-lifers can stop the same scenario from playing out in Florida is unclear. Amendment 4 needs a supermajority of 60 percent to pass, and two recent polls show that its support is close to the threshold. In July, a state panel added language to the referendum noting that if it passed, it “would result in significantly more abortions” than the 84,000 performed in the state last year, and “fewer live births.” Abortion-rights groups cried foul, but the state supreme court upheld the addition. And on August 30, former president Donald Trump said he will “be voting no” because Amendment 4 allows abortion until birth. Pro-lifers may need more breaks to prevent the Sunshine State from turning into a California-style golden state for abortion. ●

ARTICLES

Dealing with Race



Notes personal and otherwise on America’s ongoing dilemma

BY JAY NORDLINGER

On June 20, Major League Baseball staged a game at Rickwood Field in Birmingham, Ala.: a “tribute game.” Rickwood was the home of the Birmingham Black Barons, a team in the Negro Leagues. The Barons played from 1920 to

1960. The game in June was a tribute to the Negro Leagues.

MLB greats were gathered, to watch the game and comment on the past. One of them was Reggie Jackson, who played in Birmingham at the beginning of his career: for the Double-A team of the Kansas City A's (later the Oakland A's). Reminiscing, Jackson said, "I walked into restaurants and they would point at me and say, 'The nigger can't eat here.'" And so on and so forth. Lots of "nigger."

I gulped. Not because I was naïve. I knew what Jackie Robinson, Roy Campanella, and other pioneers had faced. But Reggie Jackson? He was of "my time"—not *those* times. Jackson's career stretched from 1967 to 1987. When he started out, I was in preschool, and when he finished, I was in grad school. Feel free to laugh, but Jim Crow and the civil-rights struggle seemed distant to me, when I was young—when I was in high school, let's say.

Here is another laugh: The Vietnam War seemed distant. Something "historical," like the Korean War or the world wars. I entered college in 1982. Saigon had fallen seven years before.

One more laugh, just for the fun of it: Watergate seemed distant! Might as well have been Teapot Dome! Time is such a tricky phenomenon, isn't it? Things that seemed distant when you were young can seem near when you are not.

In 1984, I was in Washington, D.C., enrolled in a program on government and politics. This was like a domestic semester abroad. I was smitten with government and politics. (Today, the smiting is of a different sort.) One day, I had a question for my grandmother, a lifelong Washingtonian: "Gram, when did the fancy country clubs—Burning Tree, Columbia, Congressional, and the rest—start admitting Jews?" She looked at me slyly and said, "Have they?"

Yes, they had—but only very, very recently.

When I was quite young, I was scandalized by the idea of Jewish country clubs. It offended my notion of pluralism and integration and Americanism. "Clannish," said critics (and "critics" is a mild word). At some point, I learned that

Jewish clubs were founded because their members had been denied admission to other clubs.

"My daughter is only half Jewish," said Groucho Marx. "Can she go into the pool up to her knees?" "My son is only half Jewish. Can he play nine holes?"

I had a lesson in identity: Sometimes, identity is forced on a person. You may not want to feel tribal, but such a feeling may be forced on you by the broader world.

Stefan Zweig was born in 1881, a year after Groucho. He grew up in Vienna, the great cosmopolitan capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. From a secular family, he never felt Jewish. That changed in about 1933. In 1942, the day before he killed himself, he finished writing *The World of Yesterday*, soon to become a classic. Its subtitle: "Memoirs of a European."

"A European"! You may think of yourself as one—but do your "fellow" Europeans?

"Pivot" is a word familiar in our politics. Let me now pivot to those politics. Kamala Harris is frequently called a "DEI hire." "DEI" stands for "diversity, equity, and inclusion." People used to say "affirmative-action hire." Our terms evolve.

It's true that Joe Biden wanted to choose a black woman as his running mate in 2020. I have opposed this kind of thing my entire life—choosing by race. But Biden's choice was not mere "social justice" (troublesome term). It was electoral calculation (which is not unknown in politics, and not even wrong).

In 1984, Walter Mondale wanted a female running mate—the first ever.

Some accounts say that he really wanted Dianne Feinstein, the mayor of San Francisco. But would the country accept the first Jew and the first woman on a ticket in the same person? In any case, Mondale went with Geraldine Ferraro, a congresswoman from New York.

In 2008, Barack Obama passed over Hillary Clinton, his chief rival from the primaries. He went with Joe Biden. Sensing an opportunity, John McCain went with a woman: Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska. In her first speech, upon being selected, Palin said,

I think today of two other women who came before me in national elections. I can't begin this great effort without honoring the achievements of Geraldine Ferraro in 1984 and, of course, Senator Hillary Clinton, who showed such determination and grace in her presidential campaign.

Clinton had received 18 million votes in the primaries. When she conceded to Obama, she spoke of "18 million cracks" in the "highest, hardest glass ceiling." Palin quoted this language and added, "But it turns out the women of America aren't finished yet, and we can shatter that glass ceiling once and for all."

Was this bad? All this "I am woman, hear me roar" stuff? I don't know. It was politics.

If I had my way, politics would be about ideas, without regard to skin color, sex, and other "immutable characteristics," to use a phrase I grew up with. But I don't get my way. I always liked *E pluri-bus unum*, a national motto (though "In God We Trust" is our official one) (I like that too). I always liked the concept of the melting pot. Quaint, right? ►

If I had my way, politics would be about ideas, without regard to skin color, sex, and other 'immutable characteristics,' to use a phrase I grew up with. But I don't get my way.

Rightly understood, color-blindness is a principle and an ideal (both): We do not judge by race or ethnicity in this country. We have had more than enough of that, over the generations.

Over the years, people tried to replace “melting pot” with “gorgeous mosaic” (a phrase associated with David Dinkins, who was mayor of New York). There was also Jesse Jackson’s “patchwork quilt.” Fair enough. I like quilts, and mosaics. But I was, and am, a holdout for the melting pot.

I am also a holdout for color-blindness. Color-blindness! Talk about quaint! People like to equate color-blindness with naïveté about race and racism. They also like to equate it with malice. With lingering resentment, I recall what Al Gore said to the NAACP during the 2000 presidential cycle:

I’ve heard the critics of affirmative action. They talk about a color-blind society. Give me a break! Hel-lo? They use their “color-blind” the way duck hunters use their duck blind: They hide behind it and hope the ducks won’t figure out what they’re up to.

Rightly understood, color-blindness is a principle and an ideal (both): We do not judge by race or ethnicity in this country. We have had more than enough of that, over the generations. We take people as people: our fellow Americans, children of God, what have you.

In my estimation, race-consciousness is a curse—a bane of human existence. “The only race is the human race,” goes a glib old line. Glib, yes, but laudable, I think. And yet . . .

Recall Leon Trotsky: “You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you.” You may not choose race-consciousness, but race-consciousness may choose you. For all I know, Reggie Jackson would like to be a plain old

American, unhyphenated and unqualified. But call him “nigger” enough times . . . (That word is like a knife-stab.)

Having touched on vice-presidential nominees, I will pivot to Supreme Court nominees. Let’s begin in 1980. Running for president, Ronald Reagan pledged to nominate a woman. He was elected, and in June of his first year, a seat came open: Potter Stewart was retiring.

Reagan had not pledged that his *first* nominee would be a woman. He had a free hand—or free-ish? He did not know whether he would get another pick—his predecessor, Jimmy Carter, had served four years with no pick at all—and he wanted to keep his pledge, no matter what. He nominated Sandra Day O’Connor.

Was that wrong? That he aimed for a woman, rather than “the best person”? You could argue it was. I might agree with you. But the Supreme Court had been in business for almost 200 years. Maybe it did no harm that there was now a woman on the Court?

In 1991, Thurgood Marshall was retiring. He was the first black American on the Court, and there had not yet been another one. President Bush nominated Clarence Thomas to succeed him. He swore up and down that Thomas’s race had nothing to do with it. Sceptically, a reporter asked, “Was race a factor whatsoever, sir, in the selection?” The president answered, “I don’t see it at all.”

Lord knows I admire Bush, and Thomas—but come on. I did not just fall off the turnip truck. (I learned that expression, as it happens, from President

Bush himself. I can’t say I’ve heard it since, except from me.)

Question: Should there ever be a time when the Supreme Court has no black member on it? My answer: In theory, why should it matter? If all nine members of the Court are Chinese-American women, fine with me (as long as their legal understanding is sound). If all nine members are left-handed Rastafarian men, fine with me (as long as their . . .). But life is not lived in theory. There are prickly all-too-human considerations.

I hated it—hated it—when President Clinton said he wanted “a cabinet that looks like America.” Who cares what they look like! What matters is what they *think* like, *act* like, *are*! Yes, but . . .

In 2022, President Biden decided to put a black woman on the Court. There had never been one. He nominated Ketanji Brown Jackson—who in most respects was an utterly conventional Supreme Court nominee. She went to Harvard College and Harvard Law School. Was an editor of the *Harvard Law Review*. Clerked for a Supreme Court justice (Stephen Breyer). Was a judge on the D.C. Court of Appeals. She was from Central Casting, Judge Jackson was. And a black woman.

The selection of justices by race and/or sex is bothersome to me. I also think it is discordant with American ideals. Nevertheless, this thought occurs to me: The Court had been in operation for 233 years. When was it time to have a black woman on it? In 2067 or so? Maybe wait until the 22nd century, just to be sure?

Representation is important to people—representation of the “wrong” sort, or unfortunate sort, as I see it. When I was young, I rebelled against the idea that black children had to have black teachers or coaches in order to have “role models.” I would argue—I was quite the arguer—“Are you also saying that black teachers and coaches can’t be role models to white children? Do white children have to have whiteys? Does a teacher or coach have to be the same color as his charges in order to be a role model?”

I was right. But I was also . . . maybe not so right. You have to walk in other people’s moccasins, if you can—even if the walk does not ultimately change your views.



REGGIE JACKSON, 2023

Though I am white, I have never thought of myself as white. A luxury, you might say. If you were tall in a society full of tall people, would you think of yourself as tall? Short people, though, would be height-conscious.

You know what makes white people race-conscious? When they marry someone of another race. Or adopt a child of another race. They are more attuned to racism. They start to see things with different eyes and hear things with different ears.

Another thing that makes people feel race-conscious? When they are denied a job, or a place, on account of their race. There must be *redress*, people say—redress in America, for hundreds of years of discrimination, and worse. Okay. But lives are lived individually, aren't they? Shall the sins of the fathers be visited upon the children, and unto how many generations?

A quick personal story: Thirty-plus years ago, I was interested in a job—a low-level job—at the *Los Angeles Times*. An editor there did me the favor of

being candid: “You may not think very much of affirmative action, Jay, but it is rigorously practiced here.” He meant: no chance.

But I will quote President Bush again, quoting a song: “Don't cry for me, Argentina.” I have done okay (according to some). Others, though—of whatever hue or sex—struggle and struggle to gain a foothold.

I could tell stories till the cows come home—illustrating different points, and contradictory ones—but I will confine myself to one more. When I was in high school, I had a friend who was a pianist. A black girl (which is relevant). One day, I asked her, “Who's your favorite pianist?” She said André Watts. “Why?” I asked. Sheepishly, she said, “Because he's black.” Then she kind of giggled. “Oh, Emily!” I said. “What does that have to do with anything? How can race be a criterion in music? On top of that, his mother is

Hungarian! That's the whole reason he's in music in the first place!”

I was correct. I was also an ass. In my defense, I was 16. I have learned more about the world in the years since, I hope. I will never give up on my ideals. But maybe I am more . . . I don't know. I think of the phrase “sadder but wiser.”

When I discussed these questions in an online column, I got a note from a longtime reader—a bright and thoughtful guy—who said,

We should give up on trying to eliminate racism, sexism, etc., and admit that forming groups, judging appearances, and practicing conformity are inherent human behaviors. I shouldn't treat a good-looking woman better than an ugly one, and I shouldn't be more upset that a deer got run over than that a rat got run over, and I shouldn't want Brandon Nakashima to win his next tennis match because he is a Japanese American like me, but I do.

I understand. I don't like it, but I understand.

If my above scribbles have been messy, it's because the issues are messy, I think. They are not black and white. (Take that however you wish.) There is a famous title, “An American Dilemma.” (The subtitle of that book—written by Gunnar Myrdal and published in 1944—is “The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy.”) “Dilemma” comes from Greek, meaning “two premises” or “two assumptions.”

I understand that people are group-minded—tribal, if you like—whether from biology or in reaction to the world as they find it. This has to be accommodated, or at least allowed for, in politics and other human affairs.

But, again, I'll take my stand (to echo another famous American book title). I will never give up on my beliefs. Will never give up on man as man. “Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons.” “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female.” “We hold these truths to be self-evident.” All that jazz. Good jazz, universal and eternal. ●

BUDGET BLOWOUT



Politicians and voters should stop ignoring looming fiscal crises

by Dominic Pino

Next year is going to be a mess for U.S. fiscal policy. The individual provisions of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA), the 2017 GOP tax cuts, expire.

The suspension of income limits for Obamacare subsidies will end. The spending caps from the 2023 debt-limit deal will go away, and the debt limit will need to be raised again.

State and local governments have until the end of 2024 to decide how they will spend their money from the American Rescue Plan Act. When it runs out, many governors and mayors will ask Washington for more. Contract authority from the 2021 infrastructure law will be running out in 2026, and inflation in the construction sector will cause contractors to raise the alarm that projects will require more funding to be completed.

Debt-funded spending during the pandemic has turned interest payments into the second-largest category of federal expenditures, exceeding military spending and set to continue growing as old debt rolls over in a higher-interest-rate environment. The federal deficit is about \$2 trillion right now, 6.3 percent of GDP, in peacetime during an economic expansion with low unemployment. It will be about \$2 trillion again next year, and that's if everything goes reasonably well. The national debt grows by \$1 trillion roughly every 200 days.

In the ABC debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, one of whom will be the president next year, the moderators did not ask a single question about the budget, the debt, or overall tax policy. In fact, the words “budget,” “debt,” and “spending” were never



still spending too much, the deficit was reduced from nearly 10 percent of GDP in 2009 to under 3 percent of GDP by 2015.

For perspective, consider that the deficit this year will be about 6 percent of GDP. During the 1930s, the deficit never exceeded 5.4 percent of GDP. As a share of the U.S. economy, deficits now are greater than they were during the Great Depression, and neither candidate for president is batting an eye.

The difference between then and now is that deficits from here on will be driven by the actuarial tables, not the business cycle or any emergency. Both candidates have agreed that they won't address the root cause of the debt problem, entitlement programs.

That's really the whole ball game, in the long run. Over the next 30 years, the Congressional Budget Office projects, Social Security, Medicare, and the borrowing required to fund them will add \$124 trillion to the national debt. The rest of the federal budget is roughly balanced over that time horizon.

The \$124 trillion is almost certainly an underestimate, because it is based on CBO assumptions that interest rates will never rise above 3.8 percent in the next 30 years. All the extra government borrowing will increase pressure on interest rates. For each percentage point above 3.8 percent, tack on another \$40 trillion or so.

The assumption that the rest of the budget will be roughly balanced

spoken by anyone in the entire debate. The moderators were following the lead of the candidates, neither of whom has any clue how to deal with any of that stuff.

In the short run, the federal budget needs to be restored to some sense of normalcy after the pandemic-spending blowout. Annualized federal expenditures in the first quarter of 2020 were \$4.9 trillion; today, they're \$6.7 trillion. Spending would be expected to be higher today than in 2020 regardless. Still, if it had stayed on its pre-pandemic trend (which was already too high), it would be about a trillion dollars lower.

Both Trump and Harris are partially responsible for that blowout, and they ought to have some ideas on how to clean it up. There's a case for significant deficit spending during an emergency, but when the emergency is over, it's supposed to stop. The U.S. ran enormous deficits during World War II, then cut them when the war was won. Even during the recovery from the Great Recession, when government was

implies that current law won't change. That means no recessions, no unforeseen need for increased military spending, and no major new spending programs without concomitant spending cuts. It also means all that stuff that's scheduled to expire next year and the year after actually does expire, in full, never to return.

And that's not going to happen. There's no way of knowing what world affairs will throw at the U.S. over the next three decades, and at least some, if not all, of the policies set to expire will be extended.

Fully extending the TCJA, the largest item, would, depending on the estimate, add between \$3 trillion and \$5 trillion to the debt over the next ten years. That's small compared with the impact of entitlements, but it's still significant. Ideally, the government should ▶

cut more than that much in spending, to compensate for the lost revenue and begin to chip away at the spending that is already too high.

It's not as though elected Republicans have no ideas about cutting spending. The Republican Study Committee has 177 members in the House, and it is chaired by Representative Kevin Hern (Okla.). Its 2024 budget proposal cuts \$17 trillion relative to what the government is expected to spend over the next ten years. Republicans wouldn't even need to get two-thirds of those spending cuts to fully offset TCJA extension. If they could get only half of them, they could extend the tax cuts and still have the largest deficit-reduction bill in U.S. history.

Through budget reconciliation, a special procedure that allows the Senate to bypass the filibuster, Republicans could pass many of those spending cuts with control of the White House, the House majority, and only 51 senators. That's a possible electoral outcome this November.

Passing such a bill would require strong leadership from the president to sell it to the American people and to ensure that no Republican lawmakers defected. Every spending program in the budget benefits someone, and sometimes "someone" is a Republican. The handful of members who won the tight elections that would give the GOP a House majority are likely to be the least conservative, because they would be elected from swing districts that could flip to the Democrats in only two years' time.

Holding such a coalition together is really hard work—just ask Mike Johnson or Kevin McCarthy or Paul Ryan or John Boehner. The Senate majority would also be slim. And the entire Democratic Party, mainstream media, and academia would caterwaul about how evil far-right extremists were pushing draconian austerity that would kill the poor, racial minorities, women, children, seniors, the disabled, immigrants, veterans, teachers, firefighters, nurses, and every plant and wild animal in the country.

Of course, all of those things are true no matter what Republicans choose to campaign on. But Trump has chosen to campaign on the barest of agendas. His platform is heavy on unnecessarily capitalized words and light on facts and figures.

Here's the full plan from Trump's platform for Social Security: "Social Security is a lifeline for millions of Retirees, yet corrupt politicians have robbed Social Security to fund their pet projects. Republicans will restore Economic Stability to ensure the long-term sustainability of Social Security."

Here's the full plan for Medicare: "Republicans will protect Medicare's finances from being financially crushed by the Democrat plan to add tens of millions of new illegal immigrants to the rolls of Medicare. We vow to strengthen Medicare for future generations."

Here's the tax plan: "Republicans will make permanent the provisions of the Trump Tax Cuts and Jobs Act that doubled the standard deduction, expanded the Child Tax Credit, and spurred Economic Growth for all Americans. We will eliminate Taxes on Tips for millions of Restaurant and Hospitality Workers, and pursue additional Tax Cuts."

The platform includes no mention of the budget deficit or the national debt at all. Rather than preparing for the fiscal fight that is coming in 2025, it leaves Republicans directionless and presents voters with little contrast between Trump and Harris with respect to the budget.

Here's Harris's full plan on Social Security and Medicare: "Vice President Harris will protect Social Security and Medicare against relentless attacks from Donald Trump and his extreme allies. She will strengthen Social Security and Medicare for the long haul by making millionaires and billionaires pay their fair share in taxes. She will always fight to ensure that Americans can count on getting the benefits they earned."

Harris wants to raise taxes on the wealthy. Trump does not. But she has said she would continue Biden's promise not to raise taxes on anyone making less than \$400,000 per year. Allowing the TCJA to expire would raise taxes on basically everyone. Since 98 percent of taxpayers make less than \$400,000, Harris is promising 98 percent of what Trump is promising on TCJA extension. She is also promising an expansion of the child tax credit, same as Trump.

After years of easy money and overregulation made housing prices soar, both candidates are talking about housing affordability. Trump wants to "promote homeownership through Tax Incentives and support for first-time buyers, and cut unnecessary Regulations that raise housing costs." Harris wants, well, basically the same things, but with arbitrary numbers thrown in (3 million houses over four years, \$25,000 for first-time buyers).

Where the campaigns diverge is in their economic illiteracy. Trump promises across-the-board tariffs that would be paid by foreigners. (They would be paid by Americans.) Harris promises to lower housing and food prices through prosecution. (If only it were so easy.)





Instead of agreeing on fiscal irresponsibility, maybe Republicans and Democrats could come together on fiscal responsibility. Earlier this year, Brian Riedl of the Manhattan Institute wrote a report in which he tries to advance that outcome. His plan wouldn't balance the budget, but it would stabilize the debt-to-GDP ratio at its current level, around 100 percent, then gradually reduce it to 73 percent over the next 30 years.

He uses realistic assumptions rather than the current-law baseline used by the CBO. In the vein of successful fiscal reforms in Ireland, Sweden, Canada, and other countries, he leads with spending cuts and proposes only modest tax increases. Countries that try to tax their way out of fiscal holes inevitably fail.

Riedl's plan would change how Social Security benefits are adjusted for inflation, and it would raise the retirement age by three months each year until it reaches 69. His plan would reduce benefits for the wealthy while keeping benefits for the poor. It would not raise the Social Security payroll tax at all.

Medicare, the more budget-busting of the two major entitlement programs, would see a one-percentage-point increase in its payroll-tax rate. That would come with reforms to make Medicare more competitive, as Medicare Part D already is, with a premium-support system for Parts A and B. Higher-income seniors would be expected to pay more of their premiums, but the eligibility age would remain 65.

These ideas aren't crazy, and capable leaders could sell them to voters. The only reason Social Security still sort of works is that Ronald Reagan and both parties in Congress supported the recommendations of an independent commission to subject benefits to income taxation, something Trump has said he wants to undo. "Today we see an issue that once divided and frightened so many people now uniting us," Reagan said in his speech on signing the Social Security reforms into law. He did that in 1983 and won 49 states in the election the next year.

That came after Democrats demagogued his earlier proposals to reform Social Security and made it the centerpiece of their campaign against Republicans in the 1982 midterms. They had, in Reagan's words, "broadcast widely one of the most dishonest canards" by saying that Republicans wanted to cut Social Security benefits.

"Revising the Social Security system has become such a politically lethal issue that most politicians refer to it as the 'third rail,'" began a story in the *New York Times* in January 1983. "Third rail" is the term that politicians use even today when talking about Social Security reform. One difference between then and now is that politicians did, eventually, grow up and realize that something had to be done, appointed a commission to figure out what that something was, and then passed it into law. And it would not have happened without the president's leadership.

Another difference between then and now is that now the problem is much, much worse. It would be one thing if America were fiscally healthy and the candidates wanted to focus their attentions elsewhere. But the budget is a disaster, and really important decisions will need to be made next year. And unlike many of the issues that the candidates have been talking about instead, the government's budget is completely, 100 percent, absolutely under the control of the government.

That means that whatever crises that come will be completely, 100 percent, absolutely the government's fault. Government leaders should have the decency to come clean to voters about what's on the horizon, and voters should demand that they do so. Neither leaders nor voters are fulfilling those responsibilities. And the budget problems are so glaring, so manifestly obvious, that the only way to shirk those responsibilities is to simply never speak of them. ●

DREAM ON

The foreign-policy delusions of Donald Trump and Kamala Harris

by Noah Rothman

Of all the straightforward questions Kamala Harris dodged in her debate with Donald Trump, and there were many, the one focused on her muddled outlook toward the war in the Gaza Strip might have been the starkest. If there is "not a deal in the making" and President Joe Biden has been unable to "break through the stalemate," ABC News anchor Linsey Davis asked Harris, how would she secure a cease-fire between Israel and the terror group Hamas?

Davis might as well have been interrogating an inanimate object. "What we know is that this war must end," Harris replied, "and the way it will end is we need a cease-fire deal, and we need the hostages out." If the vice president had ever thought about Hamas's rejection of five distinct peace overtures from the Biden administration and its counterparts, she kept her conclusions to herself. Instead, Harris pitched Americans on the notion that there will be a cease-fire only because there must be a cease-fire. And when that goal is somehow achieved, "we must have a two-state solution where we can rebuild Gaza." Those shibboleths appeared to satisfy ABC's moderators, but anyone who's following the conflict in any detail was probably less impressed.

Turning to another war, Russia's campaign of conquest and subjugation of Ukraine, ABC anchor David Muir pressed Donald Trump to clarify his views. "You have said you would solve this war in 24 hours. . . . How exactly would you do that?" he asked, adding, "Do you want Ukraine to win this war?" The simple yes-or-no question produced neither. ►

Instead, Trump replied with a meandering tirade that had something to do with the “fake numbers” around Europe’s collective contributions to Ukraine’s defense. Nevertheless, he recommitted to his pledge to put an end to the war in Europe “before I even become president” by simply sitting down with Russia’s and Ukraine’s leaders and hammering out a deal. Much like Harris, Trump supposes that there will be a deal only because there must be a deal. After all, he warned, “you have millions of people dead, and it’s only getting worse, and it could lead to World War III.”

Unnervingly enough, one or the other of these people will be elected to serve as commander in chief of the armed forces, but neither of them seems willing to acknowledge the world as it is, preferring instead one that their imaginations have conjured.

Hamas will not consent to its own destruction and submit itself to Israeli justice. Moreover, it has no interest in a “two-state solution.” It does not seek to exist in cooperative

harmony with the Palestinian factions that govern the West Bank, much less with Israel. Consequently, there will be no permanent ceasefire in the Gaza Strip until Hamas is neutralized, because Hamas’s destruction is the objective desired by the Israeli people.

This is all rather inconvenient. Sure, it is in America’s strategic interests to see this State Department–designated terrorist group defeated—an outcome that would take one of Iran’s most lethal pieces off the geopolitical chessboard. But the far-left fringes of the Democratic Party’s base are besotted with the notion that Israel is an apartheid state, a human-rights abuser, and the enemy of civilizational norms. Harris dares not acknowledge the realities that have brought the Middle East to the brink lest she offend that faction and risk its ire. So she retreats into the unreality she and they prefer.

Trump faces a parallel situation. A vocal but unrepresentative contingent of right-leaning activists have convinced themselves that the victim of Vladimir Putin’s war was asking for it. Ukraine’s selfish desire to throw off the Russian yoke and integrate economically with Europe was too provocative, they tell themselves. Ukraine’s NATO-accession plan, which stalled out at the Bucharest Summit in April 2008, somehow represented an intolerable threat to Russian national security, they maintain. What was Moscow to do but stage a second invasion of

Ukraine, slaughter its people, abscond with and reeducate its children, and erase the Ukrainian language from the face of the earth? Really, who wouldn’t?

Ukraine, too, is America’s partner. Indeed, its desire to fold itself into the American-led world order is what the Kremlin seeks to prevent. It is reasonable to expect presidential aspirants to value and preserve that order against external threats—even to build on it, as both Trump and Biden did by presiding over the admittance of four new NATO members (none of which provoked Putin to arms) in the space of eight years. That proposition might appeal to most voters, but it is anathema to the fringes that have hijacked American politics.

Failure in Ukraine could have severe consequences. A cessation of hostilities that leaves Moscow in control of the industrial regions in eastern Ukraine would leave the country more dependent on the West and more vulnerable to future Russian attacks. It would unnerve America’s NATO allies on the alliance’s frontier, some of whom would prepare to defend their own borders with or without America’s support or even input. But just as Harris dares not offend the sensibilities of some of the most aberrant elements of the American political landscape by backing Israel’s mission, Trump prefers to dance with the eccentrics who brung him.

Just as Harris dares not offend the sensibilities of some of the most aberrant elements of the American political landscape by backing Israel’s mission, Trump prefers to dance with the eccentrics who brung him.

Harris and Trump are beholden to remarkably similar fictions. “He’s got nuclear weapons,” Trump said of Putin in the last presidential debate. “Nobody ever thinks about that. And eventually, uh, maybe he’ll use them.” A paralyzing fear of Russia’s nuclear saber-rattling is precisely what led the Biden administration to mishandle the crisis Moscow inaugurated

in February 2022. “There was a moment in the fall of 2022 when I think there was a genuine risk of the potential use of tactical nuclear weapons,” CIA director William Burns confessed at a recent event alongside the U.K.’s intelligence chief. Indeed, throughout the course of Russia’s war, Biden-administration officials cited a variety of inviolable Russian red lines that they had wholly imagined. The U.S. couldn’t possibly supply Russia with long-range rocket and artillery systems, tanks and half-tracks, fixed-wing aircraft, or cluster munitions. How would Russia respond? Only when Ukraine’s position deteriorated did Biden relent. And when he did, he found that Russia’s threats were a hollow scare tactic.

Even today, the Biden White House hems and haws when asked to lift restrictions on Ukraine’s use of U.S. ordnance on targets inside Russia from which Moscow stages its invasion. Russian territory is sacrosanct, they had long assumed. But when Ukraine invaded Russia’s Kursk and Belgorod Oblasts, Putin downplayed the incursions lest he unnerve his domestic constituents. Somehow, that failed to produce a eureka moment for either the Biden White House or its chief Republican critic. Only when Russia finally began to retake its own territory did Biden see the value of lifting restrictions on Ukraine’s use of U.S. weapons platforms—which is to say, too late.

To his credit, Trump is far more clear-eyed than Harris has been about Israel's virtues as a reliable U.S. partner. That might have something to do with the Abraham Accords: the normalization of diplomatic relations between Israel and its Sunni Arab neighbors, which succeeded only by the Trump administration's cleverly pushing the intractable Palestinian issue to the back burner. The outbreak of war arrested the tempo of those agreements, and they will not resume in the absence of an Israeli victory over its Iran-backed adversary. After all, what were the Abraham Accords but a regional security framework designed to check Iran and the terrorist groups in orbit around the Islamic republic? Why would Israel's Arab neighbors proceed toward normalization with Israel if Jerusalem isn't the strong horse they thought it was?

Harris and her fellow Democrats seem to prefer a world in which Iran can be bribed and cajoled into abandoning its nuclear ambitions, and its genocidal terrorist proxies tamed by integrating them into the community of responsible state and non-state actors. Honestly, it sounds like a lovely dream. But when deterrence has broken down, it is not restored by the offering of carrots alone. Sticks come first. If Harris is blind to that reality, it's a truth to which Trump, too, is allergic.

Trump is the first to tout his justified and laudable decision to order the 2020 air strike that eliminated Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander Qasem Soleimani. But that successful attack was preceded by long stretches of dithering and inaction from the president in the face of naked Iranian aggression.

In the months preceding that operation, Iran had pirated foreign-flagged vessels in the Strait of Hormuz. It had engaged in "sophisticated and coordinated" strikes on oil tankers. It had downed a multimillion-dollar American surveillance drone over international waters. And it had executed a daring direct attack on Saudi soil, targeting two major petroleum-processing facilities. Trump absorbed it all. Why? "In the days leading up to this moment, he had talked with Tucker Carlson, the Fox News host, who reminded him that he had come to office to get out of endless wars, not start a new one," the *New York Times* reported at the time. Trump blinked, and Iran took its cues. Soon enough, Tehran-backed Shiite militias began targeting U.S. positions in Iraq with rocket and artillery fire, and one of those attacks resulted in the death of a U.S. contractor. To this, Trump finally responded, albeit only against those militias. Predictably, Iran was not deterred. In short order, Tehran orchestrated a mob attack on the American embassy in Baghdad in which well-armed rioters breached the outer perimeter. Only then did Trump get serious about the danger posed by Iran, and only after the Soleimani strike did Iran draw down its attacks on U.S. interests.

This saga should have imparted some lessons about how authoritarian revisionists respond when confronted by Western military power. It seems they went unlearned.

The next president will inherit a Middle East defined once again by an undeterred Iran. American soldiers are defending themselves against a campaign of attacks on U.S. positions in Iraq and Syria. Three U.S. service personnel died in a January attack on an outpost in Jordan. The American naval assets parked off the coast of Yemen are under constant assault by the Iran-backed Houthi terrorist sect, which "has turned into the most intense running sea battle the Navy has faced since World War II," according to the Associated Press. U.S. naval assets are patrolling off the coast of Lebanon, bottling up the well-armed Hezbollah terrorist group that Israel will have to disarm or else functionally cede the territory in its north, which Israeli citizens evacuated after the October 7 massacre.

The next president will also be bequeathed a war on the European continent to which NATO states have responded by boosting their military presence along the alliance's periphery. At summits in Madrid and Vilnius, the alliance agreed to scale up its multinational battle groups to brigade size and augment integrated regional-defense plans. NATO's European and North American members have already committed vast sums of capital and prestige to Ukraine's defense—investments that cannot be simply withdrawn. They will either generate a return or they will be lost.

The distinctions the Trump and Harris campaigns are wont to emphasize between Russia and

Russia contributes to Iran's objectives in the Middle East, and Iran repays the favor by transferring drones, helicopters, radar systems, and ballistic missiles for use on Ukraine's battlefields.

Iran have proven no obstacle to these countries' close coordination. On at least two occasions in the lead-up to October 7, 2023, the Kremlin welcomed high-level delegations from Hamas for consultations. Moscow has maintained warm relations with Iran's proxies for years, but that relationship was operationalized amid Russia's all-out effort to save Tehran's cat's-paw, Syria's Bashar al-Assad, from his own people's wrath. Russia contributes to Iran's objectives in the Middle East, and Iran repays the favor by transferring drones, helicopters, radar systems, and ballistic missiles for use on Ukraine's battlefields.

Meanwhile, China, which has embarked on an increasingly reckless campaign of naval adventurism targeting Philippine merchant vessels in the South China Sea, provides both Iran and Russia with weapons and dual-use materials and conducts joint military exercises with their armies and navies. Last year, a flotilla of Chinese and Russian vessels unnerved American war planners by descending on Alaska's ►

Aleutian Islands in a menacing formation—an approach that compelled the U.S. to dispatch four destroyers and a P-8 Poseidon surveillance aircraft.

China is sending all the signals that preceded Russia's and Iran's escalatory behavior, but neither Trump nor Harris is especially receptive to them. One relies on the magic of trade barriers and tariffs to tame the Chinese dragon. The other promises to cut Beijing off from access to U.S. technology—which might further incentivize China to lash out—while doing little to expand America's blue-water fleet and failing to arm to the teeth our front-line partners in the Pacific.

With two hot wars on as many continents and a third looming on the horizon, these are sobering times. And yet, owing mostly to their parochial political ends, the Republican and

Democratic presidential campaigns prefer to draw immaterial contrasts between America's adversaries and to pick and choose which American interests they plan to defend.

Kamala Harris cannot say that she wants America's most stalwart ally in the Middle East to win its war against Iran-backed terrorists. Donald Trump will not say that he wants a Western-facing country, which is being dismembered by one of America's oldest enemies, to win its righteous war of self-defense. Both campaigns pay lip service to the need to confront China without leveling with the American people about what it will take to achieve our objectives. These may be serious times, but they have not generated commensurate seriousness in our politics. Pray that it doesn't take an epochal disaster for America to come to its senses. ●

A CONSERVATIVE HUMAN-RIGHTS AGENDA

*It needs to be revived,
not invented*

by Elliott Abrams &
Corban Teague

Joe Biden promised to “put human rights at the center of U.S. foreign policy,” echoing the aspirational pledge Jimmy Carter made nearly 45 years earlier that America’s “commitment to human rights must be absolute.” Yet, like President Carter, President Biden not only failed to fulfill his commitment but on balance is leaving human rights around the world in a worse state than when he took office. With the Biden administration soon coming to an end, a review of its record and a look at an alternative, conservative human-rights policy for the future are timely.

President Biden continued the liberal—or, to use current language, progressive—approach to human-rights policy developed under Presidents Carter and Obama. At its core, this framework treats human rights largely as a casework problem in the realm of U.S. foreign assistance, focusing on individual interventions to address specific instances of abuse. Notably, it eschews connecting human rights to great-power competition—to paraphrase the late Senator Henry M. “Scoop” Jackson, the intensity with which that approach pursues human rights is often inversely related to the geopolitical power of the offender. And it tends to prefer highlighting America’s shortcomings (often exaggerated or completely imagined), rather than focusing on the far more egregious brutality endemic to our adversaries’ regimes, while viewing



American power at best with suspicion and often with outright hostility.

Instead, the progressive approach hopes to convince other kinds of regimes of the need to improve on human rights, and it prioritizes efforts to build better relationships through cooperation on shared challenges as a means of bolstering these attempts at persuasion. To the extent that liberals did and progressives do advocate a more robust use of American power to advance human rights, they

tend to prefer applying such pressure to allies rather than adversaries. A good example: Jimmy Carter harassed the Somoza regime in Nicaragua but not the far more repressive Castro regime in Cuba.

In contrast, the conservative human-rights policy developed by President Ronald Reagan emphasizes both the importance of geopolitical balances of power and the indispensable role American power plays in advancing fundamental rights. While working on individual cases of human-rights abuses is seen as necessary, as is chiding and pressuring U.S. allies that commit abuses, the conservative approach understands that any progress made on human rights through individual interventions will have only a limited overall impact in a world where the global balance of power tilts toward repressive and tyrannical regimes. In Reagan's case that regime was the Soviet Union. Today the United States confronts an axis of revisionist autocracies that includes China, Russia, and Iran, supported by allies such as North Korea, Cuba, and Venezuela. A conservative human-rights policy views great-power competition as the decisive theater, recognizing that success there is a prerequisite to advancing freedom on a wide scale.

The difference in results between the two approaches is staggering. While the full fruits of Reagan's conservative human-rights policy were sometimes not realized until the subsequent administration, the global state of human rights he left behind was by any measure far better than the one Biden is likely to leave his successor and the ones Carter and Obama left theirs. When Reagan left office, he had all but won the decisive theater, and the Soviet Union's ensuing collapse would allow entire societies to realize basic freedoms long denied under communist repression. Beyond Eastern Europe, countries as varied as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Uruguay, South Africa, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan saw dramatic transformations in the rights afforded their citizens in the Reagan years or soon thereafter. Understanding why is critical to articulating a human-rights policy for today that can achieve meaningful progress.

President Biden came into office vowing to uphold “universal rights” and “promote accountability for governments that abuse human rights.” From the start, he highlighted specific violations that he intended to address, including the Saudi Arabian government's killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, China's horrific abuses of the Uyghur people, Tibetans, and other minorities, and the detention in Russia of political prisoners such as Alexei Navalny, who later died in custody.

Both as a candidate and as president, Biden also made the case that the future would be defined by a clash between democracy and autocracy. Such a framing seemed initially at odds with the liberal or progressive hesitation to conflate human rights with great-power competition, exemplified by Carter's dismissal of the “inordinate fear of communism which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in that fear.” Biden's democracy-versus-autocracy distinction was in practice less stark, however, as his National Security Strategy made clear that the United States would “not seek conflict or a new Cold War” and would “avoid the temptation to see the world solely through the prism of strategic competition.”

Like his liberal predecessors, Biden significantly overvalued ‘good example’ efforts to persuade America’s great-power adversaries, often through attempts to cooperate on supposed shared challenges, to change the repressive nature of their regimes.

Instead, like his liberal predecessors, Biden significantly overvalued “good example” efforts to persuade America's great-power adversaries, often through attempts to cooperate on supposed shared challenges, to change the repressive nature of their regimes. Carter had fully embraced détente and emphasized finding ways to work with the Soviets. He made clear he had no intention of “singling out the Soviet Union for abuse or criticism” or injecting himself into its internal affairs, instead relying on the power of democracy's example to convince communist skeptics. Similarly, Biden argued that “democracies and autocracies are engaged in a contest to show which system of governance can best deliver for their people and the world.” The problem with this approach is that it incorrectly assumes America's revisionist adversaries are merely misguided and open to being shown the error of their ways, rather than recognizing that these regimes are “evil empires” and must be countered and confronted with American power.

While Biden's National Security Strategy rightly recognized that China “harbors the intention and, increasingly, the capacity to reshape the international order in favor of one that tilts the global playing field to its benefit,” it nevertheless naïvely claimed that it was “possible for the United States and the PRC to coexist peacefully” and “share in and contribute to human progress together.” Throughout Biden's presidency, his administration consistently showed that it prioritized cooperating on “shared priorities,” particularly the central progressive issue of climate change, over putting meaningful pressure on China over its horrific human-rights record and expansionist threats and aggression. Notably, this included working overtime in a failed attempt to block passage of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, which required the Biden administration to take more-robust enforcement actions to prevent goods made by Uyghur forced labor from being imported into the United States. Such intransigence was hardly consistent with Biden's prior pledge to hold China accountable for perpetrating a genocide against the Uyghurs. ►

Biden also revived President Obama’s approach of treating hostile regimes such as Cuba and Iran as favored negotiating partners without securing in return even the slightest improvements in their human-rights conditions. Rather than being excoriated for their vicious human-rights abuses, these two regimes were given U.S. apologies for our imagined sins and let off the hook for their real ones. The people of those nations, whose struggles for freedom and against violent repression deserved full American support, instead watched as deals were struck that brought cash and recognition to their oppressors. As part of the nuclear deal with Iran in 2015, President Obama sent \$400 million in cash to Iran and lifted sanctions to allow the regime to access amounts estimated at a minimum of \$50 billion and perhaps two or three times that. Similarly, through a sanctions waiver, the Biden administration allowed Iran to repatriate \$10 billion in funds previously frozen in accounts overseas; it unfroze \$6 billion more for the release of U.S. hostages. Just as President Obama failed to support the Iranian people’s uprising in 2009, the Biden administration in 2022 and 2023 failed to assist Iranians protesting the presumed murder of Mahsa Amini in police custody. Instead, the Biden years have witnessed a consistent failure to enforce U.S. sanctions, a steady rise in Iranian oil exports and oil revenues, and multiple attacks on Israel by Iranian-backed terrorists and the Iranian military itself.

Meanwhile, in Venezuela, Biden decreased pressure on Nicolás Maduro and his thugs by partially lifting U.S. sanctions on Venezuelan oil, in exchange for highly dubious promises of free and fair elections, which Maduro has since blatantly violated. And of course in Afghanistan, the state of human rights, particularly for women, is abysmally worse than when Biden entered office.

Even in his response to Russia’s brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine, one of the rare cases in which Biden has taken action against an adversary, his efforts have been far too slow and far too limited. His administration has consistently failed to send weapons to Ukraine in a timely fashion, forcing it to endure a grinding war of attrition as the American public’s support erodes.

Trade-offs are always necessary in foreign policy, especially during a dangerous global competition with repressive and aggressive powers. Without a magic wand, human-rights problems will never be completely solved, and they are only one part of a larger geopolitical picture. Biden’s famous fist bump with Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman left no doubt that Saudi Arabia’s value as a strategic partner was too great to subordinate to human-rights concerns—something already obvious when Biden painted himself into a corner with his foolish comment that he wanted to make Saudi Arabia a “pariah” over the Khashoggi assassination. The United States government is not an NGO dedicated to human rights, and balancing security, financial, commercial, and human-rights goals will always be complex.

But even in that context, the Biden administration’s record on tiny Tunisia is perhaps the best demonstration of its failed human-rights policy. Tunisia is the one country that was a democracy when Joe Biden came to office and has lost that freedom since. In Tunisia there were few or no counterbalancing U.S. interests, and the failure to protect democracy there reflects indifference or ineptitude—or both. Starting in 2021, President Kais Saied began gutting every other institution of government and concentrating all power in his own hands. He dissolved the parliament and imposed a new electoral law and constitution in a

slow-motion coup. The Biden administration watched but did nothing—or at least nothing even slightly effective.

Like Carter and Obama, Biden looks certain to bequeath his successor a global condition of human rights and freedom worse than the one that prevailed when he took office. This does not mean that Biden has no successes to highlight—securing the recent releases of political prisoners including Evan Gershkovich and Vladimir Kara-Murza, for instance, was a notable achievement. But when taken in totality, individual interventions are nowhere near enough to counterbalance the increased threats accompanying the growing power of America’s autocratic adversaries. Not only is repression worsening in Iran, China, Venezuela, and Russia, but those countries are ever more tightly bound in their assault on the United States and our democratic partners and allies—from the Philippines and Taiwan to Israel and Ukraine.

The state of human rights around the globe that President Reagan inherited was pitiful. In 1979 alone, a Cuban- and Soviet-aligned Marxist group had taken over Nicaragua and begun subverting its neighbors, the Soviets had seized Afghanistan, another petty Marxist had seized power in Grenada, and the shah had fallen to an Islamist regime in Iran that began immediately to crush the people’s hopes for freedom.

When Reagan entered the White House, he was under no illusions that there could be “peaceful coexistence” with the great-power adversary he faced. As spelled out in a 1981 State Department memo written by one of us, human rights—specifically, fundamental political freedoms—were at the heart of the Cold War conflict. The primary dividing line between the American and Soviet visions for the world was defined by those countries’ “attitudes toward freedom,” and it was the Soviet Union that was “the major threat to liberty in the world.” The Reagan administration recognized that human rights had to be central to America’s fight against the Soviets, but also that the U.S. needed to go beyond addressing individual cases and making speeches. As the introduction to the State Department’s 1981 *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* stated, the goal should be not to settle for a handful of small wins such as freeing a political prisoner here or there, important as each case was on its own, but “to encourage conditions in which new political prisoners are not taken” and “to assist in the gradual emergence of free political systems” in which human rights would be respected.

Reagan recognized that such an ambitious human-rights agenda had to be backed by power. The Soviets were never going to be persuaded of freedom’s merits by flowery rhetoric or well-crafted arguments. It was after all a competition between great powers with irreconcilable visions for the world, and it required power to

The single most important way to advance human rights today is to ensure that the United States wins this fight.

ensure that the side favoring human rights and freedom came out on top. Despite the horrified palpitations of his critics in the human-rights establishment, Reagan understood that this included the need for a stronger American military. Far from hindering human rights, U.S. military power was necessary for adversary and ally alike to take America's prioritization of the issue seriously.

Reagan also realized the importance of projecting power through robust information and political warfare, both to provide meaningful psychological support to citizens inside communist regimes and to exacerbate those regimes' internal instabilities. As political scientist Hal Brands points out, Reagan believed that America should "make common cause with those trying to change the system from within" and that it was "time to remind ourselves and others of the difference in culture, in morals, and in the levels of civilization between the free world and the communist ant heap." Through the use of tools such as Voice of America and Radio Free Europe, and aided by covert operations inside countries such as Poland to distribute necessary broadcast and communications technology, the Reagan administration made sure that people behind the Iron Curtain were exposed once again to goals of rights and freedom, fully aware of the horrific crimes and failings of the Soviet leaders around the globe, and able to organize themselves to drive change from within. These tactics helped America eventually achieve the Reagan human-rights agenda's ultimate objective—that, as Reagan put it, "freedom and democracy" would "leave Marxism and Leninism on the ash heap of history."

Over the course of his eight years in office, Reagan developed a balance between keeping maximum pressure on the primary threat to freedom, the Soviet Union, and finding opportunities to end military dictatorships in allied countries and ensure that democratic governments successfully replaced them. Owing in part to the influence of his secretary of state, George Shultz, he realized that it was possible through steady, thoughtful campaigns to move bad regimes to reform or even to replace them with genuine democracies. Sometimes this meant having to

be content with slow, incremental progress over time, because replacing a bad regime with a worse one would only harm the human-rights cause. Other times, however, when a legitimately better democratic option did emerge, the administration took action to support it, and over the course of a decade numerous military dictatorships were indeed replaced by democratic governments affording greater freedoms to their citizens. Thus Reagan pressured the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet and South Korea's Chun Doo-hwan to permit free elections and then step down—but South Korea's election came only in 1987 and Chile's plebiscite in 1988, because Reagan moved slowly and carefully to ensure that friendly dictators would be followed by friendly democrats rather than chaos.

Reagan's successful pivot away from Carter's failed human-rights policy provides three key lessons for a post-Biden course correction next year.

First, the United States must concentrate its energies on the decisive theater—the great-power competition with the aforementioned axis of revisionist autocracies. A world dominated by a combination of the Chinese Communist Party, Russia's aggressive, brutal kleptocracy, and Iran with its genocidal terrorist proxies will have no room for freedom. Human-rights policy will be a forlorn hope in such a situation.

The single most important way to advance human rights today is to ensure that the United States wins this fight. This requires treating the revisionist adversaries not as problems to be managed, and certainly not as autocracies and potential partners to woo, but as adversaries that need to be countered and confronted. A conservative human-rights policy will take every opportunity to put these regimes on the back foot—including by issuing individual sanctions and visa bans on regime officials and their families, using international forums to constantly spotlight their abuses and repression, banning imports tied to human-rights abuses such as forced labor, and seizing regime assets to compensate victims.

Second, we must take a careful, nuanced approach toward allies and partners that are not democracies and do not seek to be. We should look for opportunities to push the status quo autocracies, including our allies, toward more respect for basic human rights. This means keeping them as allies—as we learned from Carter's mistakes, it is critical that we keep these countries in our orbit. They are far less likely to reform if they fall under the influence of China or Russia. We should also be aware that political change does not automatically mean a better outcome for their citizens.

Such an approach requires a careful assessment of what progress is genuinely possible. Where fundamental change is not possible, we should look for opportunities for incremental progress—increased religious freedom, for example, or free elections at municipal levels even when the national government is not elected. We should try to measure the legitimacy of these governments and political systems, which may be monarchies. Where a government is legitimate in the eyes of its own people, we should promote our ideals with careful attention to those of a populace that may have different priorities or values.

We should also speak about human rights with greater candor. We should not say human rights are improving in a country if they are ▶

not, but should instead express our disapproval of serious abuses while admitting that we need to maintain the partnership for other reasons. Human-rights policy, we should remember, has several goals: to express our own ideals, to advance the cause of freedom globally, and to make actual progress in specific countries in the real world. Balancing those goals and choosing the right tools to advance them is what makes human-rights policy difficult—and has often made it fail.

Third, a successful human-rights policy depends not only on our principles but also on our power. Nothing will undermine the cause of freedom more than a weakening of the United States. In a world where the likes of Russia and China are thought to be gaining in power while the United States appears to decline, respect for human rights will plummet and tyranny will expand. As in Reagan's time, our ability to advance human rights globally is connected to the size and strength of our military and its ability to project power. American weakness invites aggression, and as Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Iran's October 7, 2023, proxy attack on Israel have shown, our adversaries' aggression inevitably involves horrific human-rights abuses.

A principled application of power also requires a willingness to make trouble, particularly inside our adversaries' regimes. We must effectively and relentlessly utilize information warfare to highlight our adversaries' corruption and repression. This should include getting information to citizens inside those regimes, which may involve using covert methods to distribute technology to help bypass censorship efforts. It also should involve efforts to harden opposition to autocratic regimes in nations being wooed by our adversaries.

Ultimately, a human-rights policy must include identifying and pressing on the fractures and instabilities in those adversarial regimes in order to blunt their expansionist ambitions. While the end state we should aim for is greater civil and political freedoms for their citizens, it has to be achieved finally by those people themselves, working to change the system from within. But where we see a population clamoring for freedom and believe that the regime is all that prevents it, as in Iran or Venezuela, we should support concrete efforts to replace autocracy with democracy.

In this new global power struggle, once again the attitudes toward human rights and freedom are the dividing line. The 1981 State Department human-rights memo is as true today as it was then:

Human rights is at the core of our foreign policy, because it is central to America's conception of itself. This nation did not "develop." It was created, with specific political purposes in mind. It is true that as much as America invented "human rights," conceptions of liberty invented America. It follows that "human rights" isn't something we add on to our foreign policy, but is its very purpose: the defense and promotion of liberty in the world. ●

ISRAEL'S BAD-FAITH 'CRITICS'

*Their real goal is to
delegitimize the Jewish state*

by Tal Fortgang

It has become a cliché to point out that there is a difference between criticism of Israel and denial of its right to exist. The former is well within the boundaries of acceptable discourse, as it is with any country; the latter is not, as it entertains the possibility of dismantling a sovereign state (that just so happens to be the world's only Jewish state), which is not considered a legitimate geopolitical option in any other context. But the distinction can be elided by disguising rejection of Israel's right to exercise sovereignty—including the right to conduct defensive wars—as mere criticism of its conduct.

Not everyone attempts the disguise. Open Israel-haters like U.N. special rapporteur Francesca Albanese deny that Israel has any right to self-defense, because they consider it an illegitimate state to begin with. Some call Israel's military actions "genocide" not because of Israel's conduct but because the war occurred within "the system of settler colonial apartheid that the Israeli government has built and maintained over the past seventy-five years," as the executive director of Jewish Voice for Peace wrote less than a week after October 7.

These extremists deny that Israel has any right to wage war against Hamas, even after October 7. Even if Israel killed only Hamas terrorists, and destroyed only weapons caches, and conducted a miraculous operation without harming a single civilian, Israel would still be in the wrong. Indeed, on this view, Israel could escape such condemnation only by accepting violence against its citizens or ceasing to exist—in other words, by forfeiting its most basic obligations as a sovereign nation. It is easy to see why most other Israel-haters would avoid making such an argument outright: When it is that easy to identify, it is easily dismissed as extreme, immoral, and, frankly, impractical.

What complicates things, however, are the frequent calls for "cease-fire" couched in terms of criticism of Israel's conduct in the war. Most of Israel's critics—humanitarians and opportunistic Hamas-sympathizers alike—have adopted this line. This is where classical just-war theory comes in. The theory holds that, for a war to be just, two distinct conditions must be met: First, a nation that resorts to war must do so for legitimate



reasons. Second, the war itself must be conducted according to some basic principles that restrain soldiers from needless cruelty. These two parts of the theory have been wielded against Israel in a deliberately confusing manner since it launched its counteroffensive to destroy Hamas. This conflation strikes at the heart of our ability to speak and think clearly about Israel's war against Hamas, and about what it would take to satisfy Israel's supposed critics, including, occasionally, America's most important elected officials and diplomats.

Critics of Israel's conduct in the war, then, say that Israel launched its attack for justifiable reasons but that its conduct in Gaza has been so unjust as to warrant ending the campaign. There are some signals that these criticisms are not being leveled entirely in good faith. For one, the objections began making the rounds almost immediately after Israel's response began. For another, the same warmed-over accusations of Israeli misconduct are trotted out every time Israel is dragged into war, without accounting for the particulars of the latest operation. But for those disposed to take the criticism seriously, some examination of the logic (or lack thereof) behind the accusations is warranted. Do any of the criticisms hold water? Or are they really rejections in disguise of Israel's right to wage war?

One common criticism, repeated by lawmakers and activists alike, is that too many Gazan civilians, especially children, have died or are suffering on account of the war. "Far too many Palestinians have been killed" in Gaza, said Secretary of State Antony Blinken in November, not even a month after Israel's military response began. If true, Israel's conduct could violate the principle of proportionality: Military actions can harm civilians (or civilian infrastructure) only to the extent they are necessary to achieve legitimate military objectives.

Proportionality is a confusing principle and hard to apply in the best of circumstances. Civilian harm and military

advantage are incommensurable, meaning they share no common standard of measurement. There is no way of knowing how much of one is worth trading for the other. It does not help that many analysts and commentators mistake it for, or misrepresent it as, a requirement that casualty numbers be roughly equal on both sides of a conflict. But one element of proportionality is clear: It is logically impossible to infer a violation simply by looking at civilian casualty numbers. The circumstances of each death are crucial, not just because some of the deceased are combatants whom Hamas claims as civilians but because the extent of collateral damage must be weighed against Israel's need to attack a particular military target in a particular way. That is true writ small and writ large: Just as any given air strike or raid cannot be determined to be just or unjust by looking solely at casualty counts, Israel's military campaign as a whole cannot be judged on that same basis without a thorough investigation of its achievements.

That is, of course, unless it is predetermined that *no* military achievement could be worth *any* civilian death—which is another way of saying that the war itself is illegitimate.

The proportionality argument as it has been wielded against Israel therefore fails in spectacular fashion. Determinations that Israel's Gaza campaign has violated the principle of proportionality are categorically premature. It is logically impossible to conclude at this juncture, with the intelligence thus far available to parties other than the combatants, that Israel has violated the principle of proportionality. That supposed "critics" have made such determinations nonetheless says more about the critics than it does about Israel. The only way their "criticism" makes any sense is to construe it as a claim about the war's justness, that *no* Israeli aim is worth *any* of the collateral damage that comes with war—a claim no less extreme, immoral, and useless than in its unmasked form.

Another criticism of Israel's conduct is that it is being reckless in its attacks. An international chorus of condemnation took this line in the wake of Israel's tragic April 1 strike on a convoy of aid workers from the World Central Kitchen (WCK), which killed seven. What Israel claims was a mistake (and an investigation suggests may have been a diabolical Hamas ploy) was taken to be proof that Israel is being insufficiently careful to protect civilians in Gaza. Blinken exhorted Israel afterward to "do more" to avoid civilian casualties. President Biden "threatened," according to Reuters, "to condition support for Israel's offensive in Gaza on it taking concrete steps to protect aid workers and civilians." (Those who take this line sometimes slip into unhinged slander, as when WCK founder José Andrés went so far as to accuse Israel of striking his workers "deliberately" as part of its "war against humanity itself.")

The respectable-sounding version of this ostensible criticism suffers from the elementary error of logic that one mistake proves pervasive recklessness. That is akin to concluding from one plane crash that air travel is unsafe. Plane crashes happen, even occasionally as a result of human error; but it is logically fallacious to infer from this fact that boarding a 747 poses some unusual risk. Israel takes extraordinary steps to ensure that its attacks are targeted and based on firm intelligence. The WCK strike happened (by all accounts, among those who acknowledge that it was not "deliberate") ▶

because Israel believed that Hamas terrorists were in the volunteers' vans. It is not because the IDF didn't bother to check readily available information, or because they don't care one way or another. In this instance, they were wrong. But mistakes of this kind—reasonable but incorrect conclusions based on imperfect intelligence—do not, without significant further evidence, indicate systemic wrongdoing. They are things that happen in war.

Choosing to frame a mistake as a symbol of reckless disregard for civilian life is an act of sheer motivated reasoning. There is no allegation that the mistake stemmed from a policy of shooting first and asking questions later, or from some equivalent sign of systemic recklessness. To the contrary, the facts that emerged in the weeks after the WCK tragedy suggest that Hamas manipulated Israeli intelligence to draw a strike against the aid workers. (The individual IDF personnel who ultimately authorized the strike were fired nonetheless.)

The mere fact that Israel has made mistakes with tragic consequences does not prove—nor *could* it prove—that those very systems are broken, or geared toward callousness to civilian life. It proves at most that they are imperfect.

If Israel's critics believe that perfection is the proper standard to which all militaries should be held, they should say so—and in the process declare that they have adopted a principle that discriminates against decent actors, who care about meeting such standards, and emboldens indecent ones, who don't. What is far more likely is that this standard is yet another way to redefine acceptable military conduct to exclude whatever Israel does—another way in which Israel's ability to conduct war altogether is backhandedly denied. In other words, it is a *jus ad bellum* argument that has nothing whatsoever to do with Israel's actual conduct. The fact that even Israel's supposedly friendliest and most sophisticated critics, in the highest echelons of government leading its primary ally, can muster only vague exhortations about “doing more” (more what?) and taking “concrete steps” (such as?) to achieve unstated standards of care for a population held hostage by an enemy terror organization, speaks to the way critics set a standard for Israel that requires perfection. Any prosecution of a war, therefore, is liable to this criticism at any time, for any reason. It is another way of revoking Israel's right to wage war whenever the critics find it convenient.

Just a bit more on the motivated reasoning inherent in this criticism is in order. Even the best-trained and most ethical militaries suffer from occasional intelligence failures, even in war zones less dense, confusing, or rigged with human shields than Gaza. In October 2015, for instance, the United States repeatedly bombed a trauma hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan, killing 42 and injuring 30. The Air Force (and Afghan authorities) mistakenly believed that Taliban fighters were hiding there, when in fact it was being used by Doctors Without

Borders. The U.S. government apologized for the tragic mistake. No good-faith critic of American actions thought to extrapolate from this high-profile mistake that the U.S. armed forces were anything less than well-trained and committed to legitimate war aims.

Because that sort of “criticism” is reserved for the Jewish state, and portrays Israel as unreasonably cruel in its warfare, Israel's defenders have called this a modern-day blood libel. While that freighted phrase might shed more heat than light on the discourse, what is clear is that the accusation that Israel chooses where and how to strike its enemies, and which ones, without due care is hardly a “criticism.” It is, rather, *at best*, an excuse to call for Israel to lay down arms entirely. Rather than aiming to disqualify this line of anti-Israel rhetoric by labeling it antisemitic—a strategy to which the harshest anti-Israel voices are immune, having convinced themselves that accusations of antisemitism are reflexive and fleeting—it may be more useful for Israel's defenders to show that it suffers the dual disgrace of being illogical and deceptive, and all in service of a peculiar double standard.

In campus encampments and other outposts of anti-Israel animus, common rallying cries have included obvious eliminationist language (“There is only one solution, intifada revolution,” “From the river to the sea, Palestine must be free,” etc.). There was also the more general, more emotive, and nonsensical assertion that Israel is not engaged in a war but a genocide. On the premise of that absurd claim, Israel's defenders are disingenuously accused of lacking sympathy for displaced Gazan civilians, not caring about dead children, and willfully overlooking Israel's “indiscriminate” attacks—that's the word President Biden used in December to describe the military campaign.

Making heads or tails of this cheap shot masquerading as a criticism of Israel's conduct is a challenge because it is not, at its root, an argument at all. It is, in most cases, a dodge. Framed as something other than an argument about proportionality or recklessness, the charge is that Israel's war against Hamas is just *too bloody* to be classified as a war—not in terms of military advantages gained, or of what it would look like if Israel made no mistakes, or of anything else. Just *too bloody*, period. It draws its strength from the indisputable underlying reality that war is hell. Indeed, it is. But that alone does not make a war unjust, much less a genocide. If it did, all wars would violate the second principle of justice, making the whole enterprise of just-war theory nonsensical.

By presenting depictions of war to a populace unaccustomed to its inherent horrors, those who want to stop the war shift the definition of “genocide” to mean “really bad war,” show pictures of Gazan children maimed by Israeli air strikes (or sometimes pictures of children caught in entirely different wars in other countries), and use other means to bring the awful realities of war closer to home. They bank on receiving visceral, sympathetic reactions: *Nothing can justify such collateral damage; this must not be a normal war; it must be as awful a war as has ever been fought, the full weight of power coming down on the powerless—a genocide.* Arguments over semantics and legal definitions of “genocide” aside (not to mention the moral inversion of accusing the Jews of perpetrating one), this elision of the comparisons necessary to determine whether Israel is conducting its war in an unusually lethal way is a means not of applying just-war analysis but of circumventing it. Any decent person would demand that whatever party is proximately

responsible for unleashing hell must stop until it can come up with a more humane way to achieve its goals. Cease-fire now.

The obvious response to those trading on the hellish conditions in Gaza is that *this is a war*, and all wars produce unspeakable horrors. If Israel must cease its fire simply because *any* civilians are dying, because *any* human bodies are being tragically maimed, because there is *any* horrible suffering—and all these things have undoubtedly happened, because that is what happens in war—we have once again slipped into the long-rejected argument that Israel may not wage war at all. (And again, leave aside what provoked the war in the first place and the tactics Hamas uses to maximize harm to its own civilians.) But even when this claim is construed in its most favorable light—as an argument about the brutality of this war relative to wars generally—it does not hold water.

As ever, the critical question for any criticism of conduct is not whether many civilians, as an absolute number, have been killed. That would preclude all wars, regardless of how righteous the mission and how impeccable the military conduct. It is, rather, whether civilians have been killed at an unacceptably high rate. Without even entering the proportionality analysis, that is the barest evidence needed to present a prima facie case that Israel is doing *something* wrong in prosecuting its war aims.

Is that case plausible? In mid February, Reuters cited “a Hamas official based in Qatar” who said “that the group estimated it had lost 6,000 fighters” since Israel began its October counteroffensive. This appears to be the last time, as of this writing, that Hamas has given any such number. (Israel said at the time that the number was actually 12,000; its more recent estimate is that it has killed 17,000 Hamas militants.)

For the sake of a hypothetical, let us use Hamas’s number. Imagine further, against all evidence, that *all* subsequent casualties in Gaza have been civilians. Though in moments of candor its leadership admits that its tally may be off by as much as 25 percent, Hamas now claims that the total death toll is around 42,000. And 36,000 of these, in this hypothetical, would be civilians. Imagine yet further that Hamas has undercounted and that there are 4,000 *more* civilians who have been killed by the IDF. In this improbable and horrifying scenario, only 6,000 of the 46,000 deceased—13 percent—were combatants.

That number would *still* be an improvement on the usual combatant-to-civilian ratio of deaths in wartime. According to the United Nations, “civilians [account] for nearly 90 per cent of war-time casualties.” The U.N.’s number includes all wars—not just urban wars like the one occurring in Gaza, where civilians are densely clustered. Nor does it even begin to account for Hamas’s rampant and well-documented use of human shields, its prevention of civilian evacuations, and its theft of humanitarian aid, among the many other ways it sacrifices civilian lives for cynical ends.

Of course, the hypothetical does not reflect reality. A more reasonable, yet conservative, estimate is that Israel has killed two civilians for every one combatant. Based on some revisions that the United Nations quietly undertook in mid May, the number is likely even better than that—but even a two-to-one ratio would be astounding, far and away the most humane urban war ever prosecuted.

Such exceptional results are no coincidence. They are, rather, a reflection of Israel’s long-standing commitment to go out of its way to preserve civilian life within enemy territory. As international-law expert Michael Schmitt has written, “There is no question

Calling Israel’s conduct unusually brutal or bloody or ‘indiscriminate’ is not just absurd; absurdity would not even get you there.

that the IDF’s warnings practice, in general, is the gold standard. Indeed, as a matter of policy, the IDF typically exceeds what the law requires.” Israel’s conduct in the war has indeed long been the source of much scrutiny by international-law experts: “Israel’s 2014 operations in Gaza, and the extensive efforts to provide such warnings, have elevated the discourse on this warnings precaution to unprecedented levels,” according to a paper from the International Law Association Study Group in 2017. “Some worry that the [IDF] created an unrealistically high bar on when and how to provide warnings.”

It should come as no surprise, then, that even as the current Gaza campaign progresses, as Israel has uncovered more intelligence and improved its urban-warfare tactics, the casualty count has essentially flatlined. True to form, the “critics” have pivoted to a new line of strained objections to Israel’s behavior, especially that the Israeli government is not doing enough to secure a negotiated release of the hostages still held by Hamas. From this repeated inability to hold Hamas responsible for anything it does—that it brought Israel’s response upon itself, that it endangers Gazan civilians, that it murders hostages, indeed that it continues to hold hostages, including two children, at all—one sees that scapegoating Israel, not ensuring a just peace between it and its neighbors, is the goal of the critical chorus.

Calling Israel’s conduct unusually brutal or bloody or “indiscriminate” is not just absurd; absurdity, like the hypothetical above, would not even get you there. Israel is quite obviously, by its enemy’s own implicit admission, fighting an exceedingly careful war. Yet that is not good enough for supposed “critics.” If this impeccably precise war still draws hysterical calls for Israel to cease its fire, perhaps it is time to stop entertaining the notion that the “criticisms” Israel faces every time it is dragged into war are anything other than expressions of the extreme denial of Israel’s right to exist as a sovereign nation. And perhaps it is time to stop referring to those “critics” as such for good. ●



CHILDREN *after* OCTOBER 7

How American Jewish families are making sense of the aftermath

by Haley Strack

How do we know we're on the good side?" So asked an eight-year-old of his mother. A sensitive boy, he's aware of his family's Zionism and also perceptive enough to wonder about the "Israel commits genocide" sign that he sees every morning on the drive to school outside the Israeli embassy in Washington, D.C. Children are supposed to be shielded from harsh realities, to be happily preoccupied with make-believe, to have their innocence protected. But for Jewish parents, protecting their children from those realities has become painfully difficult in the year since Hamas attacked Israel. Jewish parents in the United States have had to find a way to talk to their children about what happened, about the world they're growing up in and the way it's changed since October 7, 2023. What should parents tell their children about the evil of Hamas, something that the adults themselves still find unimaginable?

I spoke with several Jewish parents, some in person in D.C. and others by phone, to get a sense of how they are answering their children's post-10/7 questions. One mother told me about an upsetting experience her son had at school. Like Rachel Goldberg-Polin, the mother of Hersh Goldberg-Polin, who was murdered by Hamas after eleven months in captivity, this woman has been wearing a piece of masking tape on her shirt marked with the number of days that Israeli hostages have been held in Gaza. Her son, age twelve, wanted to follow his mother's lead, so he also put a piece of tape on his shirt every day before going to school. One day, he realized he'd forgotten to put it on. When he asked his math teacher for a piece of tape and a marker and explained why, she asked whether she could join him.

But this teacher did not write the number of days of captivity for the hostages on her piece of tape. She wrote "75+"—a reference to the years since Israel's founding in 1948. For her, that number marks what Palestinians call the *nakba*, or "catastrophe." She chided the boy and told him in front of the class that Israel is "evil."

Although he didn't completely understand the historical context of the situation, the boy knew instinctively that what his teacher said was wrong. He knew that in the current war, he supports Israel because Israel deserves support. His mother, who has taken the family to visit Israel several times, has been honest with her three children about the reality of war. She has taught them why Israel has the right to exist, and to view Israel as the Jewish homeland. "People will always try to kill the Jews," she told me, but she wants her children to "think of life, not death."

"Everything happens in the car," another mother said. It is in the car that her exasperated daughter has asked if she's "listening to Hamas again." That's because the girl has grown accustomed to hearing the word "Hamas" on the *Commentary* magazine podcast her mother often listens to. It is in the car that the girl, having seen a poster through the car window accusing Israel of genocide, asked, "Mommy, what's genocide?" Many parents find that children ask difficult questions in the car, perhaps because it's a place separate from home, which in a way can make it feel easier to bring up hard subjects. Questions like "What happens to the soldiers who die?" and "Why did terrorists take a baby?" There's just no way for parents to shield their children from the news; kids will find out details, whether in the media or from other kids, that their parents would rather they didn't have to know—yet. "Did terrorists bomb a kindergarten in Israel?" The truth is gruesome, but lying is impossible.

It's uncomfortable, and heartrending, to explain to children the depths of evil that Hamas has perpetrated. Hamas's abuse of its own people—maximizing civilian deaths by using them as human shields—is a type of evil that challenges a parent's ability to explain it. The same is true when trying to distinguish "civilian" from "terrorist" if one's child has heard that some of the hostages were held by civilians in their homes.

One way to help children make sense of post-10/7 realities is to teach them about Israeli resilience and the values of Western civilization. So says Caroline Bryk, the executive director of the Tikvah Fund's Jewish Parents Forum. When discussing October 7, a parent's goal should be to "draw inspiration from the strength and heroism of the Israeli people," she told me, because out of the war's devastation emerged stories of courage: the security officers at the kibbutzim who defended their communities from terror, the medics who ran back into the carnage at the Nova music festival to save the wounded, the children who prayed together in safe rooms. "This is a world with good and evil—that's not a reality I'd like to shield [my children] from," Bryk said.

Many have drawn parallels between the shock of October 7 for Israelis and the shock of September 11, 2001, for Americans. The days after the 9/11 attacks were also a time when parents had to find ways to explain a new reality to their children. One of the “deepest problem[s] in facing terrorism,” Charles Krauthammer wrote days after the attack, is “failure of the imagination.” By that he meant an inability to imagine “the nature of the evil” that the terrorists were capable of. This, again, is a subject that’s wrenching for adults, let alone for children.

For Jewish parents and educators, it is more important than ever to make sure children understand Israel’s history. Doran Katz, Tikvah’s director of day-school initiatives, sees this as a moment to ponder what it means to be a Jew in America and to teach Jewish children to take pride in their connection with Israel. Israeli history is an essential component of Jewish education. Kids need to know why Israel is America’s strongest ally in the Middle East; they need to understand the astounding success of the Zionist movement in creating the world’s only Jewish state; and they need to know why it is just to support Israel in its defensive war against people who want to destroy it.

The majority of American Jews are Democrats, according to the Pew Research Center, and for many of them, it came as a shock that the progressive Left largely abandoned them after October 7. Just days after Hamas’s attack, the Chicago chapter of Black Lives Matter, for example, posted on social media an image of a person paragliding with a Palestinian flag—a reference to one of the ways Hamas terrorists invaded Israeli territory to commit massacres and rape—with the caption “I stand with Palestine.” U.S. feminist organizations were silent about Hamas’s rape and mutilation of Israeli women until months into the war. Public-school Jewish parents, who may have appreciated and wanted their children to inherit liberal ideals before October, now feel homeless—left out of the protected classes they once pledged to help defend. Jewish children are berated in classrooms and subject to antisemitic slurs. In schools where “identities” are celebrated, Jewish identity doesn’t count or is denigrated. For some parents, sending their kids to Hebrew school has become at least as important as regular school.

Tikvah has also noticed a broad willingness on the part of American Jews after October 7 to engage in American civic life, even as students in college encampments glorified Hamas, and protesters on streets called for Israel’s destruction. Jewish day schools sent students to a pro-Israel rally in Washington, families sang Hebrew songs in front of United Nations headquarters in New York, and communities across the nation have organized Shabbat dinners with empty seats to remember the hostages.

Jewish history now includes the story of October 7. But it also includes the story of a people whose resilience in the aftermath of that horror is a new chapter in Jewish survival. ●



DISINFORMATION WARS

*The would-be censors
march on*

by Andrew Stuttaford

By giving online intermediaries a sizeable degree of immunity from liability for user content, Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996 combined a characteristically American defense of free expression with a determination to ensure that this promising new sector was not stifled by another American tradition, predatory litigation. The outcome, through blogs, social media, and countless other outlets, has been to open the public square to voices that once would never have been heard.

Unfortunately, some of those voices—bots, trolls, and other, more skilled operatives—were Russian. Their task, particularly after the 2014 invasion of Ukraine, was to deliver disinformation to the West—lies spread to discredit, damage, or disorient an opponent. Their objective was to whip up division and unease, fomenting racial rancor here, circulating rumors of some emergency there.

Two brutally polarizing political battles in 2016, over Brexit in Britain and between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in the U.S., offered an obvious opportunity for troublemaking, and Russia took it. We will never know for sure whether online disinformation tipped the scales in either vote (some analysts say yes, others no, and others maybe). I doubt that it did, but significant swaths of the establishment in both countries were happy to entertain the idea. For the Remainers and for Hillary Clinton and her supporters, it soothed the pain of rejection and cast a cloud of suspicion over the result, giving the Kremlin an additional somewhat paradoxical win: The more that disinformation is talked up, the more distrust there will be.

Online disinformation is a real phenomenon, but with its effectiveness something of a mystery, there’s a good chance that the threat it poses has been overstated. ►

Quite a bit of the research in this field is speculative or, one way or another, self-serving. To be sure, in the right place, or if well crafted and timed correctly (shortly before an election, perhaps), it could be a menace. Its impact will also vary with its subject matter. A pandemic will likely attract more attention than politics. And there is reason enough to worry about deepfakes.

Overall, people appear to regard content seen on social media more skeptically than those who would “protect” us from disinformation think (or say they think). More generally, exaggerated views of persuasiveness are connected with

A helpful complement to conveniently flexible ‘hate,’ panic over disinformation has been a handy rationale for greater control over internet speech.

a belief in the gullibility of others. Moreover, much, maybe most, disinformation is drowned out by all the other material coursing through its targets’ feeds.

But panic over disinformation (whatever its source) has been too useful to be allowed to let drop. A helpful complement to conveniently flexible “hate,” it has been a handy rationale for greater control over internet speech. It has accelerated the rise of “fact-checkers,” who all too often are propagandists and censors masquerading as guardians of objectivity. Their biases are insufficiently examined (not that they are hard to guess).

The year 2016 was key in the process by which combating disinformation became embedded in the institutional structures of the West. But events in Germany in the previous twelve months had already set in motion the move toward tougher online-content regulation, without which such combat could never take place. In 2015, Angela Merkel flung open Germany’s doors to over a million asylum-seekers. The official narrative, backed up by all the major parties and a compliant media (with exceptions here and there), was of the country’s generous *Willkommenskultur*. Not all Germans felt the same way, however, and some of them went online to say so, not always politely. Merkel, as if anticipating and mimicking the behavior of the Biden administration during the pandemic, leaned on Mark Zuckerberg to crack down on such talk.

Arguing that social-media companies had not done enough to address this issue and well aware that resentment over the new arrivals was not going away, Merkel encouraged the German parliament to pass the pioneering, influential, and catchily named *Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz* (the

Network Enforcement Act, or NetzDG) in 2017. One key provision was a requirement to take down posts within a certain time after their being reported—24 hours if they are “manifestly” illegal, seven days (usually) if their illegality lacks that “manifestly.” Repeated breaches of the law can lead to a fine of up to 50 million euros, triggering concerns that, preferring to err on the side of caution, companies would “over-comply.”

Other countries, unburdened by that annoying First Amendment, and unbothered by criticism that it was too harsh (strangely, it had its fans in Moscow), followed suit. And then in 2022, a couple of days, ironically, before Elon Musk concluded his acquisition of Twitter, the European Union passed its Digital Services Act (DSA), with Hillary Clinton cheering the censors on: “For too long, tech platforms have amplified disinformation and extremism with no accountability. The EU is poised to do something about it.”

The DSA imposes a wide range of obligations on online-service providers if they offer their services in the EU. These increase substantially in the case of companies that have more than 45 million users a month there and that Brussels has designated as either a very large online search engine (VLOSE) or a very large online platform (VLOP).

X has been classified as a VLOP and, as such, is required, among many other obligations, to undertake an annual assessment of “systemic” risks arising out of, to oversimplify, the way its operations are set up and the use that is made of its services. Some risks are obvious (dissemination of illegal content), but others are extraordinarily broad (“any actual or foreseeable negative effects on civic discourse and electoral processes”). The VLOP must then explain how it “mitigates” those risks. It is clearly envisaged that the appropriate response to “illegal hate speech” is to remove it, but the overall requirement is that mitigation should be “reasonable, proportionate, and effective.” In the hands of an aggressive regulator, that could mean anything. The EU Commission has already notified X of its preliminary finding that the company is in breach of various provisions of the Digital Services Act. X will push back, and Musk has said that X is looking forward to battling this in court. Another EU Commission investigation into X is still under way. Even though Thierry Breton, the EU commissioner who has had some acrimonious spats with Musk, has now quit, X should not expect that Brussels will ease up.

The immense potential size of the penalties—up to 6 percent of global revenue—for a breach of the Digital Services Act may become an irresistible inducement for Musk to try to cut a deal with the commission and, for that matter, to find a safe haven in a compliance regime staffed with European counterparts of the “content moderators” (censors) he fired from Twitter. Ignoring Brussels would not work. There would be cripplingly hefty fines for that too. If Americans’ online speech is to avoid the EU’s censorship, U.S. social-media companies will have to set up systems to ensure that their customers in the EU see only fare sanitized to Brussels’s standards.

The Digital Services Act is not meant to criminalize any new categories of speech. What is illegal under the law of an individual EU member-state or under EU law will remain illegal. Any amendments to legislation in that area will be left to national parliaments or to the EU's legislative process. The DSA's broad language could easily be used to impose de facto censorship on all sorts of theoretically legal speech, in the interest of preventing "harms" that exist only in the progressive imagination and that are hinted at in, among other places, the law's preamble, but also elsewhere. Thus on its website the EU Commission warns of the dangers of "climate disinformation." Tackling that is, it states, incorporated within its general approach to disinformation, including making it "more difficult for disinformation actors to misuse online platforms."

Crowdsourcing ideas to take advantage of the collective intelligence available online makes sense. Insisting that there can be only one answer frequently does not.

Davosworld, birthplace of the Great Reset, is forever looking for a fresh crisis that can be exploited to advance its agenda, so it was fairly predictable that contributors to the World Economic Forum's 2024 Global Risks Report reckoned that, on a two-year view, misinformation and disinformation represented "the most severe global risk." That the following was highlighted was more surprising: "In response to mis- and disinformation, governments could be increasingly empowered to control information based on what they determine to be 'true.'"

This is already happening. A regulator cannot classify an item of interest as disinformation or "misinformation" (false information that is passed on by someone who thinks it is true) without, among other questions, deciding whether it is true or not. Then there is malinformation. According to the U.K.'s Government Communication Service, this "deliberately misleads by twisting the meaning of truthful information." One example of this might be a deceptively edited video. *Reason's* Jacob Sullum suggested "true but inconvenient" as an alternative definition after a column in which he criticized the CDC for exaggerating the benefits of mask mandates during the pandemic was given two warning labels by Facebook: "missing context" and "could mislead people."

Malinformation, the Government Communication Service recounts, "can be challenging to contest because it is difficult to inject nuance into highly polarized debates." If it's too challenging, that's a sign that the real objection may be

to disagreement, not to disinformation. This could be counterproductive and, in an epidemic, lethal. Crowdsourcing ideas to take advantage of the collective intelligence available online makes sense. Insisting that there can be only one answer frequently does not.

But would-be censors march on. The U.K.'s Online Safety Act is coming into force. Its maximum fine? Ten percent of global revenue. In addition, there's a possibility of jail. Australia's government is planning legislation with more modest demands. Its maximum fine? A mere 5 percent of global revenue. Section 230 continues to come under fire from both sides of the aisle. Some Democrats, angered by all the right-wing wrong-think online, want social-media companies to take more responsibility for the content they host. Some Republicans are irritated by anti-conservative bias in content moderation. Meanwhile, Facebook, Google (when its novice chatbot Gemini showcased the extent of the company's bias, the ensuing PR fiasco was grimly entertaining), and their peers—with the exception of X—carry on as before.

Musk is (as, to take one example, Beijing knows) less of a "free-speech absolutist" than he claims. But the fury his changes at X have stirred up within a large part of the West's political, regulatory, and media classes has been a disturbing reminder of the depth of the authoritarianism that runs through their ideological mix. In the course of a tirade he wrote for the *Guardian* in late August, former U.S. labor secretary Robert Reich referred to the arrest in France of Pavel Durov, the co-founder and CEO of Telegram (a company that is both messaging service and social network) and argued that "regulators around the world should threaten Musk with arrest if he doesn't stop disseminating lies and hate on X."

Bringing in Durov is also an extrapolation too far. The charges he faces—alleged complicity in crimes such as drug-trafficking, the distribution of child pornography, and refusing to cooperate with the authorities—presumably flow from the ability to send heavily encrypted messages over Telegram, very different legal territory.

Reich also welcomed the Supreme Court's recent ruling in *Murthy v. Missouri*, which he described "as a technical win for the public good (technical because the court based its ruling on the plaintiff's lack of standing to sue)." The Court, he maintained, "had said federal agencies may pressure social media platforms to take down misinformation." That will surely depend on the circumstances, but that Reich approved of the Court's letting the feds get away with their appalling behavior in this instance is dispiriting.

The legacy media's relative indifference to this matter is in marked contrast to its intense criticism of X/Twitter since Musk took over the company. This has extended to performative "departures" from the site and now to AP's tweeting out a how-to guide to quitting X. The overarching goal, presumably, is to stigmatize X and, by extension, those who post on it. It reflects much of the legacy media's repudiation of objectivity and its growing discomfort with disagreement.

This is not going to end well. ●

Athwart

Dog Days

A

nyone who thinks modern politics is too nasty hasn't seen a dog fight a raccoon. No quarter, no rules. If you slash off a hunk of your opponent's nose, there is no clarifying tweet the next day that apologizes for sentiments expressed in the heat of the moment.

You cannot blame either combatant for its deplorable actions, unlike in modern politics. They are operating by instinct: The raccoon is lumbering around like an idiot full of rabies, looking for something to eat, and the dog is fiercely protecting the pack from a creature that might get in the house and eat the Milk-Bones. There is no dissuading the dog, since honor and safety are at stake; all you can do is turn on the hose, which makes the dog stop and think, *Wait, I'm protecting the kibble, and you think this is time for a bath? You want to do my nails next?*

At the end of the struggle, our dog did not raise a paw in victory, because that is not their way. He limped inside and had his wounds cleaned and daubed with unguent. I told him he would live in the annals of combat and be sung about like Hector and Achilles. The incident was quickly forgotten, just like the time when he consumed an entire rabbit and spent a day immobile as his innards labored to move the thing to the haunch-trembling conclusion, an event that required X-rays and a dinner of charcoal. I know it was forgotten because he ate another rabbit the next week.

But I remember. And here's the thing: While I remember the long, worried night at the 24-hour vet, the heart-smothering sight of your beloved pet immobile with discomfort, stoic and resigned, the long vigil to ensure that the discharged cud of rabbit was not left on the best rug, I do not remember what was happening in politics that particular day.

Odd, I know. Odd! Surely it mattered so much. Surely someone in Congress had announced hearings into something that would result months later in a video on Twitter in which someone OWNED the witness who refused to admit that the bad thing was actually a bad thing, which then led to nothing. I would wager that there was a law proposed that would have regulated the standard thickness of garden hose, spurred by a *USA Today* piece about cheap, substandard garden hoses that kinked too easily,

and a congressman had a press conference with a family that had been a victim of substandard garden hoses, and he encouraged the passing of "Betty's Law," as they were calling it, because Betty, nine years old, had been watering the flowers, the hose kinked, and she cried.

It's entirely possible that someone in my own state made an adjustment to a law that governed the adhesive strength of the license tabs we stick on every year. Or Donald Trump said something was SAD, and also Joe Biden said he was PROUD of the 60th executive order that skirted the perimeter of the Constitution, and various solons said things about how history would forever look back and say that today was the day civilization had been saved by a new rule that restricted dishwasher drying time, thereby fighting climate change.

None of that matters when you are binding up your dog's snout.

Yes, I have a daughter, too, and no, I don't remember what John Kerry said when she had a 104-degree fever. I use the dog as a current example because I'm paying more attention to his limp than to what Kamala Harris says about anything. It doesn't mean I don't, er, have a dog in this fight—just that my dog in his fight puts things in perspective. As much as I follow the health of the republic with keen interest, wary hope, and occasional bouts of resignation and despair, the world does not end on November 5. Whereas a very small but precious world would have ended if the raccoon had been the victor.

This is one function of age, I suppose. In some cases, it makes people so cranky that they endorse the candidate who stands for everything they oppose, and all their lifelong fans feel like a wife whose husband says he's trans at age 52. Me, I figure: We'll fight another day. As Cicero once said: "Bloody is the struggle we join with resolve. If only it was covered by pet insurance." ●

CHARLIE AND LUTHER'S Most Excellent Whizzbang American ROLLER-COASTER ADVENTURE

In which two star-spangled writers
set out to see the country while
upside down and sideways

by Charles C. W. Cooke
and Luther Ray Abel

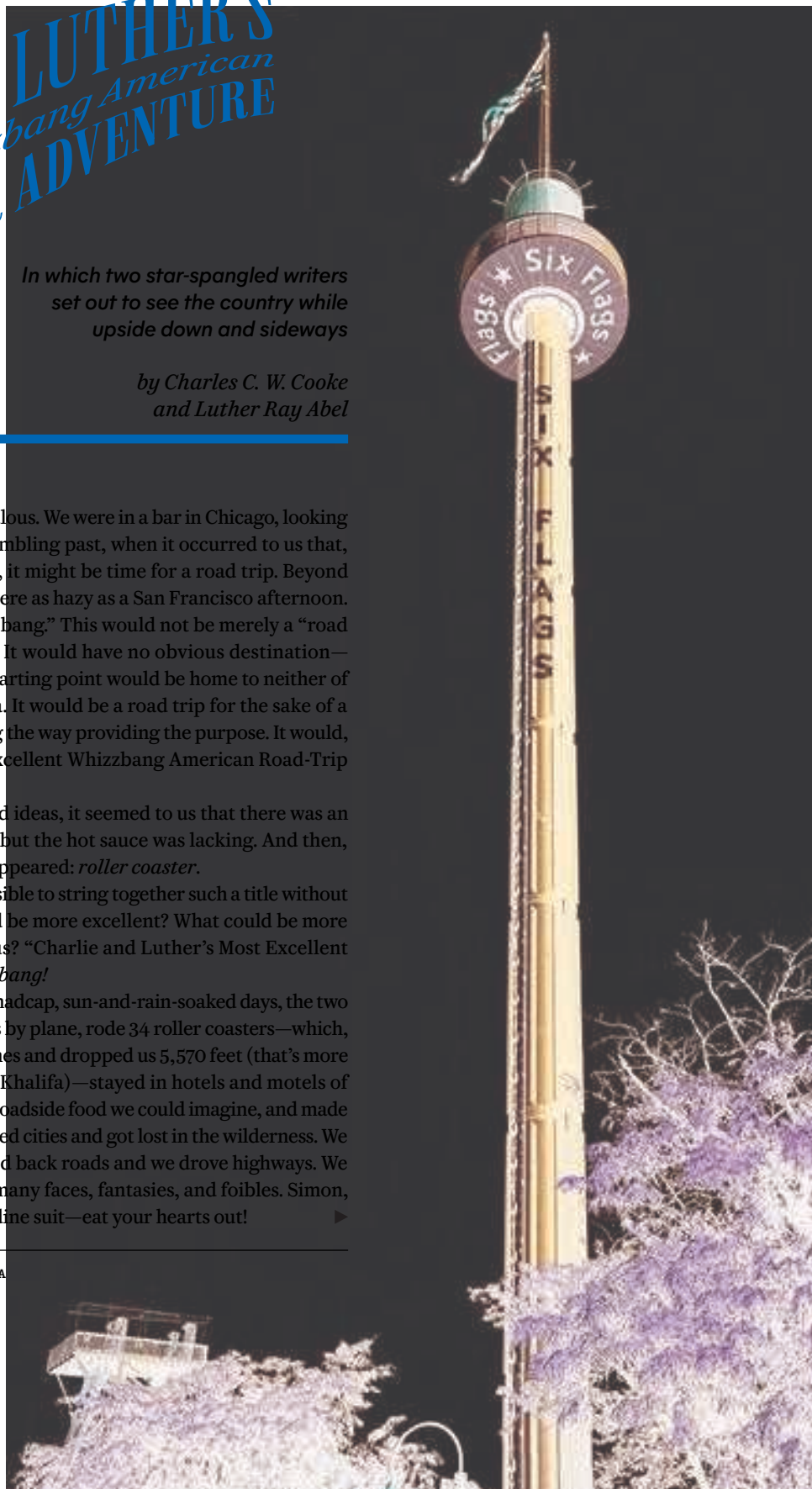
Sometimes, the best ideas start out nebulous. We were in a bar in Chicago, looking idly out of the window at the L train rumbling past, when it occurred to us that, with the summer rapidly approaching, it might be time for a road trip. Beyond that faint outline, though, the details were as hazy as a San Francisco afternoon.

What we wanted, we agreed, was “Whizzbang.” This would not be merely a “road trip”; it would be a “Whizzbang” road trip. It would have no obvious destination—though it would, of course, have to end. Its starting point would be home to neither of us—though it must, of course, be in America. It would be a road trip for the sake of a road trip, with the attractions we found along the way providing the purpose. It would, we decided, be Charlie and Luther’s Most Excellent Whizzbang American Road-Trip Adventure.

And yet, despite that jumble of words and ideas, it seemed to us that there was an ingredient still missing. The taco was ready, but the hot sauce was lacking. And then, like a fly landing on the end of our noses, it appeared: *roller coaster*.

Really, what *else* could it be? Is it even possible to string together such a title without injecting “roller coaster” into it? What could be more excellent? What could be more American? What could be more adventurous? “Charlie and Luther’s Most Excellent American Roller-Coaster Adventure.” *Whizzbang!*

And so, over the course of eight cyclonic, madcap, sun-and-rain-soaked days, the two of us drove 2,765 miles by car, flew 2,591 miles by plane, rode 34 roller coasters—which, taken together, threw us upside-down 107 times and dropped us 5,570 feet (that’s more than a mile and twice the height of the Burj Khalifa)—stayed in hotels and motels of profoundly varying repute, ate every type of roadside food we could imagine, and made our mark on 15 of these United States. We visited cities and got lost in the wilderness. We saw splendor and dilapidation. We rummaged back roads and we drove highways. We went, that is to say, to *America*—with all its many faces, fantasies, and foibles. Simon, Garfunkel, Kathy, and that man in the gabardine suit—eat your hearts out! ▶



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHORS

SKY TREK TOWER AT SIX FLAGS GREAT AMERICA

But first: what we *didn't* do. What we didn't do—by a mutual and sacred agreement—was take advantage of any modern technology or predictable convenience. Our ground rules for the journey were as follows. We would navigate by paper maps alone, book nothing in advance except our airfare, and neither eat nor lodge in any chain. We would not stare into our phones. We would stream no music; only local radio and pre-compiled mixtapes were permitted. And, to add a touch of surreality for ourselves and an unsuspecting public, we would wear Hawaiian shirts for the duration. Our one concession to comfort: We were permitted to stay with any friends or acquaintances we had along the route. But, if we did, we could not ask them to do anything on our behalf that we were forbidden to do ourselves. Our budget, door to door, was \$2,000, including gas.

The plan was to begin in New York, at Coney Island, and to end in California, at Disneyland. But, perhaps as was to be expected, that immediately got blown out of the water. Luther made it to the Big Apple, but Charlie's flight from Jacksonville was canceled at the last minute. So, in the absence of an acceptable alternative, the decision was made that we would drive toward one another at speed and meet in the middle. That middle, it turned out, was Richmond, Va., and it was there, 338 miles from Coney Island, in the midst of a Carnian rainstorm, that our adventure belatedly began. Our first objective was Kings Dominion, still open for another hour. Hoping against all reason that the thunder and lightning crashing down

all around us might be limited to precisely where we were, we called the park's guest-relations line and asked whether we should come down. "I almost never say this," said the man who answered, "but I would definitely not do that."

Rats.

With the prospect of late-night roller coasters firmly foreclosed, we took the only option that was left to us: We drove off to look for food—a task that, given the late hour, the fact that we were forbidden to visit any chains, and our having sworn off all forms of digital navigation, proved much more difficult than one might have thought. From a distance, we learned quickly, pretty much every building with lights in the window looks as if it *could* be a restaurant or bar.

"Is *that* one?"

"No, I think that's an auto-body-repair shop?"

"How about that?"

"It sells marijuana."

"What about that?"

"Yeah, but it closed an hour ago."

Eventually, from our station under a swinging red light, we saw some magical words off in the distance: "US Best Wings." We were sold.

US Best Wings, it turns out, was one of those ambitious little places that, in spite of its small size, tries to serve every sort of semi-fast food that you can find in the United States. It offered salads and seafood and subs and pizza and rice bowls and burgers and gyros and, of course, wings. Independently, we both ordered the same thing—the lamb gyro—and then, to the bemused looks of the other patrons who were waiting with us at the window, sat down on the establishment's sole plastic bench to chart our course on our paper map. To where? Naturally, Coney Island was out. But Hersheypark wasn't *too* far away. We determined to go there instead.

This, almost certainly, was our most self-conscious moment on the whole trip.

There we were, at 10 P.M., by the side of the road in Mechanicsville, Va., standing out like a pair of sore thumbs that had been kicked out of a sore-thumb competition for being excessively sore and thumb-like. We were wearing brightly colored Hawaiian shirts. The Ford Motor Company had kindly lent us a Brobdingnagian Bronco Raptor, with an arty white, gray, black, and orange paint job

CANDYMONIUM AT HERSEYPARK



and wheels the circumference of eastern Alaska. Awesome. We were trying to navigate guided by a large paper map that had almost no detail on it at all. (Because we had not imagined that we'd be in Virginia, we had ordered no Virginia-specific cartography.) And, as was our wont throughout the trip, we were filling the time with interesting hypotheticals, such as "What would you do first if pursued by the Mob?" and "How many centipedes would it take to bring a man down?" Nobody said anything to us. But it was clear what they were thinking. (*Seven thousand three hundred*, obviously.)

Our gyros having been consumed—and the locals having been thoroughly entertained—we drove off into the darkness, in the general direction of Hershey, Pa. After a couple of hours of remote and rain-soaked exploration, fatigue set in, and, having noticed an independent motel, we pulled into its parking lot in search of shelter and sleep.

Within moments of entering our rooms, it became clear exactly *why* this motel was both remote and independent. Neither of us is especially prissy about these things, but, as motels go, this one pushed the edges of even our substantial tolerance. It exhibited a peculiar odor, what one might get if one were to combine tobacco and microwaved fish, and the sheets and the blanket were full of small holes—two facts that, when combined, left us wondering whether the last occupant had spent his evening stabbing a Long John Silver's-branded cigarette into the bedclothes. The robin's-egg-blue bathrooms were passable, but each contained a weird bow-legged sink so unbothered by Newtonian mechanics that we were not sure it would survive the night. Naturally, we slept like babies until the alarm went off at 5:45 A.M.

The next morning brought the summer—sunshine, cloudless skies, a light breeze, glorious—and, after a quick refueling stop at the local Shell (87-octane for the car, Bunn-brewed octane for us), we were off. To our surprise and delight, we not only managed to navigate our way to Hersheypark with just our paper map but we arrived on time as well. Things were looking up! We had no more canceled flights to contend with, no more traffic jams to importune us, no more monsoons to dampen our prospects. We were here, in Hawaiian shirts, baseball hats, and a pint of sunscreen, at one of the great roller-coaster destinations of the world.

When most people imagine Hersheypark, they presumably think of chocolate. And, at both its factory and on its famous Chocolate Tour, it has that in abundance. Less known, though, is that it has 14 roller coasters—15 if you count its dual-tracked racing attraction, Lightning Racer, as two—many of which are among the best in the world. As with cocktails, the key to a great amusement park lies as much in the mixture as in the quantity, and Hershey's blend is as diverse as can be. It has two enormous hypercoasters (Candymonium and Skyrush); it has a whippy inverted coaster (Great Bear); it has a sit-down multi-looper (Fahrenheit) with a freakish-looking vertical lift and an initial drop that bends inward beyond 90 degrees; it has an excessively fun launched coaster named Storm Runner, which takes riders from 0 to 72 mph in two seconds before pulling them through a 150-foot top hat, a cobra loop, a heartline roll, and a snake dive; and, above all, it has Wildcat's Revenge—a wood-steel hybrid built by Rocky

Mountain Construction that looks and feels as if it were dreamed up in a madcap *Bugs Bunny* cartoon in the early 1940s.

Both of us were new to Hersheypark, and we were impressed by what an unusually pleasant place it is. Many American amusement parks are glorified parking lots. This one was not. It was well run, clean, and had excellent food—we opted for the pulled-pork and brisket sandwiches—and it was built into such dramatically hilly terrain that each section of the place felt intimate and self-contained. By the time we had finished all that we wanted to do, we'd both completed nearly 15,000 steps, as well as climbed the equivalent of 22 flights of stairs. Relative to what Coney Island offered, the place was a definite upgrade.

We were an hour and a half into our trek toward Ohio when, atop a strange-looking mountain in the distance, we saw what seemed to our tired eyes to be an enormous football stadium. From what we could discern, it was every ►



STORM RUNNER AT HERSEYPARK

bit as large as The Swamp or The Big House. But what was it doing *here*? In the middle of nowhere? It didn't make any sense. There were signs dotted around for "State College," but neither of us knew what that meant—which state? what college?—and, without the internet at our disposal, we were unable to find out. Intrigued, we drove up the hill and discovered that we were on the campus of Penn State, and that the field that crowned the peak was no less than Beaver Stadium, the second-most capacious football stadium in the United States, and the home of the Nittany Lions. A college town! That could be fun.

But it was deserted. A ghost town. A haven for students, without any students in attendance.

Undeterred, we parked the car and wandered toward any signs of life. We found them in a pool bar named Sharkies, which, among other delights, offered "Cold Beer to Go." True to its promise, Sharkies had both pool and cold beer. But it had little else besides, and so, after a quick game of pool that Luther lost at the last minute, we took our cue to exit and ended up in a Chinese restaurant that had 50 tables in it but not a single customer other than ourselves. We ordered our food, and, as if to under-

score that nobody was around, the guy who took our order went back into the kitchen to cook it himself. It was delicious.

That night, we stayed down the road from Grove City College, in what had to be the best motel for the price in all of America (clean, comfortable beds for \$55 per room), and then got up at the crack of dawn to drive to Cedar Point, on Lake Erie. For both of us, this was a highlight of the trip, for Cedar Point not only has the world's greatest assortment of roller coasters and thrill rides but is one of the most beautiful amusement parks in the United States. The view from across the lake when one enters from nearby Sandusky is spectacular. There, on that picturesque chersonese, behind the boats and the rocks and the water lapping up at the peninsula, one finds no fewer than 17 roller coasters—five of which stand 200 feet or higher. (One of those is 420 feet tall.)

When we had set out that morning, we had resolved to do all 17 of them, plus any among the park's other offerings that we found enticing. Unfortunately, the weather did not play ball. As far as we could see, we'd have from about 10 A.M. to 3 P.M. to get our fix, and after that we'd be serving at Erie's tempestuous pleasure. Thus motivated, we prioritized Cedar Point's star turns. We rode Millennium Force, a 310-foot-tall Bond villain's murder machine that dropped us at 93 miles per hour at 80 degrees (the drop is so long that one feels one's stomach levitate enough to tickle the clavicles) and then sped

along the shores of the lake; we rode Steel Vengeance, the lunatic older brother of Hersheypark's Wildcat's Revenge; we rode Maverick, a surprisingly intense double-launched "blitz" coaster whose best parts have been cleverly hidden from view; and we rode Raptor, one of the original (and best) efforts of famed Swiss design firm Bolliger & Mabillard. We stayed ahead of the weather and got them done, one after the other, until, eventually, as we got to the front of the line for Cedar Point's converted floorless looping roller coaster, Rougarou, the storm that had been threatening us all day finally rolled in, and the park all but shut down.

Holding out hope that the weather would improve and not yet ready to leave, we ducked inside a saloon, ordered a couple of beers, and watched

a genuinely entertaining country-and-western cover band put on a show. But, by the time the show was over, it was clear that our day at the park was done, and that it was time to get back into the Bronco and drive toward our next stop: Six Flags Great America, outside Chicago.

We were near Hillsdale College, in Michigan, when, just after eight, we found a small, slightly run-down town with a

charming-looking Italian place called Cascarelli's that offered "pizza," "sandwiches," and "cocktails" and that seemed to be exactly what we were looking for. Walking in, we confirmed this suspicion. It was family-run. It had a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. The pizza smelled terrific. And it was... closing. *Aargh!* From behind the bar, the proprietress kindly tried to assuage our obvious disappointment. "I can do you a quick drink," she said, pointing to the handful of taps. "But then we'll have to close." For now, pizza was off the agenda.

The following morning brought back the good weather—and just in time for us to drive past the astonishing Chicago skyline on our way to our destination. This, we remarked, was something that you lose when flying. The plane leaves, it hangs in the air, it lands, and, unless you're paying remarkably close attention, you feel as if you've been teleported. In a car, you see everything: every turn, every pothole, every sign. Over time, the anticipation builds. "Chicago 50." "Chicago 30." "Chicago 15." And then, in the distance: Chicago. You were back there, and now you're here, and you know exactly how one state of affairs became the other.

But, of course, we weren't going to Chicago. We were going to Great America, which markets itself as being in Chicago but, in reality, is closer to the Mars Cheese Castle in neighboring Wisconsin. Before we'd left home, we'd made a list of which among the major rides we hoped to get done at

The view from across the lake when one enters from nearby Sandusky is spectacular. There, on that picturesque chersonese, behind the boats and the rocks and the water lapping up at the peninsula, one finds no fewer than 17 roller coasters.

each park, and our list for Great America was no different from any of the others. We wanted the tallest, the fastest, the loopiest. But here, we were thrown a fastball, for while Great America has some standout attractions on offer, the highlight for both of us was the humble American Eagle, a 43-year-old wooden throwback with Victorian design elements, vintage trains, and the American flag flying from its highest point. At 127 feet, the American Eagle is a veritable midget relative to some of the park's other attractions, but there is something about the protracted *clack-clacket-click* of the lift's anti-rollbacks and the swaying of the wood that makes the whole thing feel infinitely more precarious. On the American Eagle, you feel and hear everything. It's violent. It's rough. It's fast. And, above all, it's loud—in that *throcketa-throcketa-thunk-chock-chock-chock* manner that you get only from rides that hew to the old rules. As with the SooperDooperLooper at Hersheypark and Gemini at Cedar Point, the American Eagle is a time machine that evokes the second golden era of roller coasters in the late '70s and early '80s. We loved every minute.

At lunchtime, in the park's small and bustling food court, we made our second failed attempt to get a pizza. Unlike Cascarelli's, the joint was open. But a single slice was \$17, and so, having concluded that \$17 for a slice of pizza was a bit dear, we did what any principled economizing travelers would do and bought a pair of \$16 beers instead.

That evening, having exhausted all that Great America had to offer, we called on some family friends of Luther's in the Chicago suburbs and got a luxurious break from motel mattresses and tiny bar soaps. Sitting in the backyard of their John Hughes-esque suburban house, we ate an alfresco dinner of hamburgers, chips and salsa, and red wine, and told them all about our trip. The next morning, after doing laundry, eating a hearty breakfast, and taking a too-brief detour into the city, we headed to O'Hare for our flight to San Francisco. Nearing the airport, we expressed our profound disappointment that we were obliged to leave the open road and our beloved white Bronco. Per the tickets, our flight would take four hours. How long, we wondered naïvely,

could it take to forswear air travel and drive instead? *At least thirty hours*, the map suggested. Flying it was.

In San Francisco, we picked up our second vehicle: a manual Ford Mustang Dark Horse (500 hp, 418 lb./ft. of torque). The car's subtle periwinkle-blue exterior belied what the sarcophagus-like Recaro seats and grumbling burble in the exhaust confirmed the first time we accelerated: This girl could *go*. And what a place to open it up! From Santa Clara, we took the Pacific Coast Highway—Highway 1, perhaps the single greatest stretch of road in the world—and watched in admiration as the scenery changed and the sun slowly sank into the sea. In Carmel, we stopped for the wood-fired pizza that we'd twice been so cruelly denied and then started toward Southern California via Big Sur.

And then . . . we were stopped. At dinner, over a glass of Chianti classico, we had resolved to drive down the Pacific Coast Highway to wherever we ended up when we got tired and then, the next morning, to duck inland at San Luis Obispo. But, ten miles or so south of Carmel, we encountered a flashing sign informing us that that stretch of the PCH was closed. This, of course, is the sort of thing that one knows well in advance when one is using Waze or Google Maps or what you will. But, with only our AAA maps, we had no way of knowing until we got there. Reeling, and by dome light, we scrutinized our atlas for a little while and then, with assured shrugs, put our fates into the hands of a tiny little back road called the G16.

On paper, the G16 was a respectable-looking, if unusually thin, curvy line. In reality, it took us far away from civilization and into a world of gated ranches, dark woods, and stars so brilliant that they shone through the windshield.

Narrow, bumpy, and prone to dramatic shifts in elevation, the trail served to remind what a big, wild, beautiful country this is. For around an hour and a half, with the Mustang in an extended trot in its third and fourth gears, our stomachs were sloshed around a series of hairpin turns that we shared only with lynx, jackrabbits, and a host of other ▶

STEEL VENGEANCE AT CEDAR POINT



furry and suicidal pedestrians. It was an exhilarating, uncertain drive.

We spent an uneventful night at a nondescript motel in King City, and then it was time to head toward Six Flags Magic Mountain, a famous Southern California thrill park 35 miles north of Los Angeles that, at the time of our visit, had 20 roller coasters—more than any other facility on earth. On our way, we passed through the Santa Lucia Wilderness, with its amber peaks framing a cauldron of fog, and, in the Santa Ynez Valley, we sped past Buellton, the home of split-pea soup. Surrounded by our American muscle car, powering effortlessly down the 101, we took satisfaction in our nation's ability to split peas, atoms, empires, and anything else it so chose. Where else, after all, do people build hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of roller coasters in the desert?

Magic Mountain is best described as what a kids' playground might look like if kids' playgrounds were fed anabolic steroids. It is a Wassily Kandinsky painting of a park, with strands of brightly colored roller-coaster track—yellow, green, red, blue—running everywhere the eye can see. At its center stands Superman: Escape from Krypton, a behemoth of a ride at 415 feet tall. Generating a sound that is as loud as a jet engine, Superman launches its riders *backward* out of a dark tunnel at 100 mph, before dropping them at 90 degrees back to earth. If the rest of the coasters are spaghetti against the open California sky, Superman is the fork sticking out of the middle.

If it exists, Magic Mountain has it. It has a hyper-coaster, and an inverted coaster, and a hybrid coaster, and a flying coaster, and a monorail coaster, and a suspended coaster, and a floorless coaster, and a “4D” spinning coaster, and a racing coaster, and a wooden coaster, and a coaster on which you remain standing up while riding. It has the world's tallest vertical loop and the world's *first* vertical loop. It is pretty, because California is pretty, but, knowing what it's good for, it makes little attempt at landscaping or theming and, unlike Cedar Point, it does nothing to preserve the sense of Victoriana that attaches to the best of the old boardwalk-style parks. One goes to Magic Mountain to have fun in the sun, and for no other reason. Were you to prompt AI with “insane roller coasters in the middle of nowhere” 10,000 times in a row, no computer would come up with a superior model. “Thrill Capital of the World,” the sign at the entrance reads. Indeed so.

In the evening, we met up with a friend in Santa Barbara and had dinner and beer at a Mexican hole-in-the-wall named La Super-Rica, which we had been told was a favorite of Julia

Child's. La Super-Rica took no reservations, accepted only cash, and had not updated its chairs or tables since 1980. It was perfect. That night, we couch-surfed in nearby Ojai—a spectacular little town nestled near St. Thomas Aquinas College in the valley of the Topatopa Mountains—and, the next day, set off for our final stop of the trip, Disneyland, where, in 1955, the story of the modern amusement park began.

The locals complain that Disneyland has all but taken over Anaheim, and, for better or for worse, they are right. Disney now has two parks on the site—in addition to The Happiest Place on Earth, there is Disney's California Adventure, a second gate that is (mostly) themed to the Golden State—plus a “Downtown Disney” area, three hotels, and a sprawling collection of parking garages that serve as a barrier between the world that Walt created and the quotidian outside world. Compared with Florida's Walt Disney World, Disneyland remains small, but compared with every other amusement park in the United States, it is a wonder.

Within minutes of entering the ecosystem, we looked at each other and said, almost simultaneously, “It's just different, isn't it?” And it is. The theming, the attention to detail, the care that has gone into each and every last item on display—there's nothing else like it. Having spent four wonderful days eschewing art and strapping ourselves to the world's finest thrill machines, we found it a nice change of pace to submit to some old-fashioned Hollywood escapism. Transported, we ranged far and wide, from the edge of the Star Wars galaxy, to the deck of the *Mark Twain* (a Mississippi paddle steamer), to the midst of a



CHARLES AND LUTHER WITH THEIR FORD BRONCO RAPTOR

Toy Story–inspired shoot-out (final score: Charles 151,00 to 149,100 Luther), to the cursed temples of Indiana Jones and his crew. We crossed an ersatz Golden Gate Bridge, had a glass of California wine at the Golden Vine Winery, visited the dynamite-laden canyons of Big Thunder Mountain, and, when we finally tired, collapsed into a riverboat for a leisurely jaunt around the jungle. We had come a long way from Richmond, Va.

Driving out of Disneyland that evening, we found our bearings toward the flashing lights of Los Angeles and then turned up the Mustang's radio in time to hear the turbulent introduction to Chuck Berry's “Back in the U.S.A.” roaring through the speakers.

Well, I'm so glad I'm livin' in the U.S.A.

Yes, I'm so glad I'm livin' in the U.S.A.

Anything you want, we got it right here in the U.S.A.

Amen. ●

BOOKS, ARTS & MANNERS



DETAIL OF MASSACHUSETTS MILITIA PASSING THROUGH BALTIMORE (1862), BY F. O. C. DARLEY

BOOK REVIEW

Clash of Extremes

ALLEN C. GUELZO

Decade of Disunion: How Massachusetts and South Carolina Led the Way to Civil War, 1849–1861, by Robert W. Merry
(Simon & Schuster, 528 pp., \$35)

If it came down to just two individuals, we might say that the Civil War was a contest between John Brown of Harpers Ferry and Jefferson Davis of Davis Bend, one the relentless Fury who planned to destroy slavery by violence, and the other the self-righteous planter who could see in slavery no wrong.

But if it came down instead to just two *states*, we would be tempted to say that the Civil War was the conflict of Massachusetts and South Carolina. It was, after all, South Carolina that had been agitating from the 1830s onward for some kind of reconstruction of the Union that would perpetuate slavery, and it was South Carolina that eventually led the bolt from the

Union in December of 1860 that put the armies in motion. It was Massachusetts, on the other hand, that was the first state to erase legalized slaveholding (in 1780), almost the first host to an anti-slavery newspaper, and the first to send its federalized militia to Washington shortly after President Lincoln's call to suppress the Southern rebellion. Take these two out of the political equation, and perhaps we might not have had a civil war at all.

Which is, of course, wishful thinking. There were copies of Massachusetts and South Carolina all across the American republic in 1860. John Brown, remember, came originally from Connecticut, Davis from Kentucky; Pennsylvania militias were shoulder to shoulder with the Massachusetts regiments whom mobs attacked in Baltimore while they were in transit to defend the capital in 1861; the first anti-slavery newspaper was published in Ohio.

Nevertheless, no other states seemed to have louder bullhorns, or at least louder mouths, than Massachusetts and South Carolina. That rare political bird, the South Carolina Unionist James L. Petigru, remarked after South Carolina's attempt at secession that the state was "too small for a republic, but too large for an insane asylum." Much the same thing was said about Massachusetts—or at least Boston—by Amos Lawrence after the disgraceful surrender by the courts of the fugitive slave Anthony Burns: "We went to bed one night old-fashioned, conservative, compromise Union Whigs and waked up stark mad Abolitionists."

Robert W. Merry is a veteran Washington journalist, a former correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal* and editor of *Congressional Quarterly*, and the author of five earlier books on subjects such as American journalists, American presidents, and American foreign policy. This is his first venture into the vast ►

literature of the Civil War era, and from the first, Merry is convinced that Massachusetts and South Carolina really were the mutual harbingers of the war. Both states were home to some of the most radical political agitators of the conflict; together they embodied an American *Kulturkampf* between an uncompromising Puritan moralism and a swaggering, profit-eyed hedonism. “No two were as disparate in outlook, religion, moral precepts, or cultural sensibility as Massachusetts and South Carolina,” Merry writes, and each led the rest of the republic over the brink like the Pied Piper.

This juxtaposition is a colorful way of illustrating the ominous decade leading up to the war. Merry opens the book with the death of John Calhoun in 1850 and closes with the election of Jefferson Davis as the provisional president of the new Southern Confederacy in February 1861 (and the firing on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor two months later). Between those two goalposts, three prominent South Carolinians—Andrew Pickens Butler, Robert Barnwell Rhett, and James Henry Hammond—face off against three giants of Massachusetts Whiggery—Charles Sumner, Henry Wilson, and Robert Winthrop—on the political playing field of Congress.

Merry is at his best in building the conflict-portraits of these men, particularly Charles Sumner. It was Sumner’s sneering reference to Butler’s speech defect during the debate in 1856 over slavery in the Kansas Territory—Butler, he said, had “discharged the loose expectation of his speech, now upon her representative, and then upon her people”—which got Sumner beaten nearly lethally to a pulp by Butler’s relative, Preston Brooks, on the Senate floor. But Merry is also conscious of how these banner-carriers for each state quarreled among themselves—especially the South Carolina triumvirate. Butler, Hammond, and Rhett enjoyed “a tight consensus . . . on the state’s need to defend its rights and protect slavery at all costs,” but they savaged one another without mercy over

“the best tactical approaches in that defense,” and especially over whether breaking up the Union was the only way to perpetuate slavery.

There are a few areas in which Merry is less successful. First, his narrative is more about the prominent politicians of Massachusetts and South Carolina on the national stage than about the two states. Apart from his opening description of their deep-rooted cultural differences, we actually learn very little about the states themselves—their populations, their economies, the behavior of their state legislatures, their legal systems—and thus very little as to why we should regard these two states as emblematic of a clash of political civilizations. The up-country of South Carolina was, and still is, a very different region from Charleston and the lowcountry; Boston teemed with “stark mad” abolition sentiment, but western Massachusetts was far less

Sumner certainly deserves his post of celebrity. But Henry Wilson moved unsteadily from the Whig Party to the Free-Soilers and the nativist Know-Nothings. Wilson may indeed have been a “new breed of politician for a new and more complex era of politics in his state and region,” but it was his ability to bridge the gap between old-line Whigs and Know-Nothings, not his hostility to South Carolina, that got him elected to the Senate in January 1855. Only during the Civil War would Wilson move unequivocally into the company of the most Radical Republican opponents of slavery.

Robert Winthrop is even more unlike Sumner or, for that matter, Wilson. Burdened with the most famous colonial name in Massachusetts history, Winthrop was a model of the New England Whigs. He rose with them in the 1840s to become speaker of the House; he fell with them, too, losing a seat in the Senate to Sumner

It is not clear from Merry’s narrative that Sumner, Wilson, and Winthrop are actually as reflective of Massachusetts as Hammond, Butler, and Rhett are of South Carolina.

riled up. Samuel Bowles, the editor of the *Springfield Daily Republican*, did not much care for slavery, but he was not any more enthused about abolition, and he was convinced as late as February 1860 that “the disposition to trample on the Constitution and to disregard the rights of the Southern states, is confined to a very small fraction of the North, not representing probably one in a thousand of the population.” And even Boston was home to a particularly violent draft riot in July 1863.

There is a second problem, this one involving personalities. There is not much question about the prominence of Hammond, Butler, and Rhett in South Carolina (although Andrew Butler died in 1857, removing him from any role in the run toward civil war), but it is less clear who is speaking for Massachusetts.

and failing in his bid for the governorship of Massachusetts in 1851. There was no question about Winthrop’s distaste for slavery. But he looked for a “just, practicable, and Constitutional mode of diminishing or mitigating so great an evil as slavery,” not its abolition. What, exactly, makes Sumner, Wilson, and Winthrop emblematic of Massachusetts?

In the end, it is not clear from Merry’s narrative that Sumner, Wilson, and Winthrop are actually as reflective of their state as Hammond, Butler, and Rhett are of theirs. There are numerous Massachusetts politicians who bob to the surface of *Decade of Disunion* only to sink again after a short time—the abolitionists Garrison and Lawrence, the Secret Six who funded John Brown’s raid in 1859. And there are others (such as Governor John Andrew) who make no appearance

in the book but surely have as much claim as Wilson and Winthrop to be mirrors of Massachusetts.

This, in turn, throws into relief the original question of why we should regard Massachusetts and South Carolina as somehow more responsible than other states for the rush into civil war. The war was, at its foundation, not about whether slavery should be allowed to continue in the 15 Southern states where it was legal in 1860—not even Lincoln in his first inaugural address contested that—but whether those states should be allowed to legalize it in the western territories and the future states those territories would become. It was Kansas that bled in the 1850s, not South Carolina or Massachusetts.

Merry has the story of the great American disunion to tell, and it is no fault of his that the story is too broad to be confined easily to two states. In fact, as much as Merry would like to make the coming of the war a collision of these two, he simply cannot resist how the tale of disunion lures him onto other stages and around other personalities. Stephen Douglas plays a major role in *Decade of Disunion*, despite having no connection to either Massachusetts or South Carolina; William Henry Seward has one of the longest entries in the index, but with nowhere else to call home but New York. And no book, no matter how devoted to the Esau-and-Jacob relationship of Massachusetts and South Carolina, can keep Abraham Lincoln of Illinois from playing an increasingly large part in the story.

Merry has a fine eye for the close political encounter. But he makes his share of mistakes (he uses the wrong vote tallies for the Lincoln-Douglas Senate race in 1858 and takes no notice of Charles Francis Adams's bid for the presidency under the Liberal Republican banner in 1872). The book also includes more than a few stylistic infelicities (“the rap on Barnwell Rhett”; “it was a bit rich for Phillips”). Moreover, *Decade of Disunion* will need to justify itself alongside David Brown's excellent new history of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, *A Hell of a Storm: The Battle for Kansas, the End of Compromise, and the Coming of the Civil War*,

and classics such as Michael Holt's *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (1978), David Potter's *The Impending Crisis* (1976), and, even further back, the first four volumes of Allan Nevins's *Ordeal of the Union* (1947–50). Merry's book is an easy and delightful telling of a difficult and depressing decade, but by no means the last word on it. ●

BOOK REVIEW

Lust in Action

ALGIS VALIUNAS

Thom Gunn: A Cool Queer Life, by
Michael Nott (Farrar, Straus and Giroux,
720 pp., \$45)

Experience is the best teacher, the old adage goes, but what it teaches is often very different from what one had looked forward to learning. Carnal knowledge in particular has been known to plunge the knower into ever darker depths of confusion and consternation.

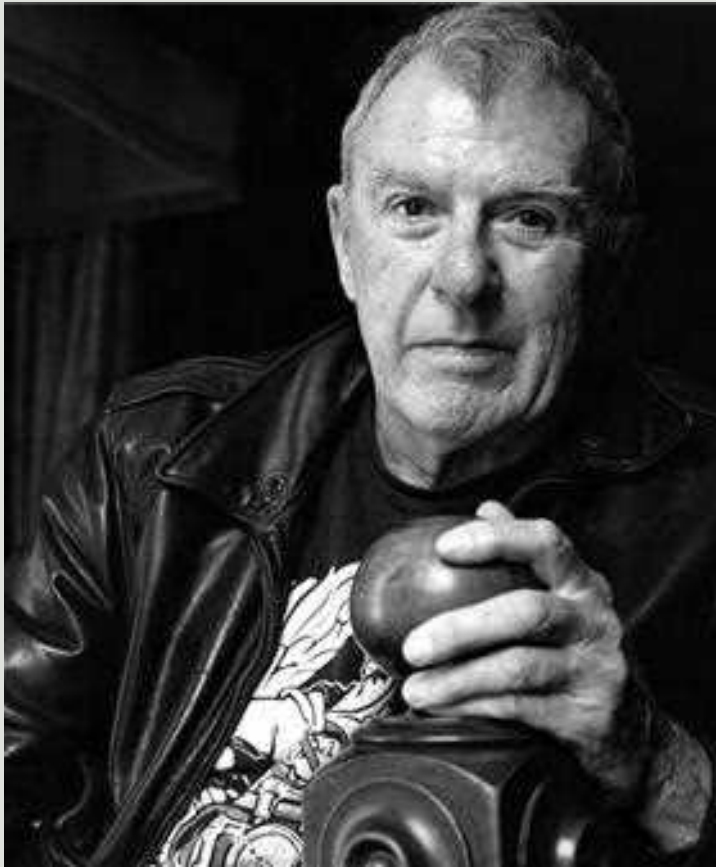
But some people don't scare easily. *Experience* and *energy* are the bywords of a certain type of modern artist who creates from a superabundance of vitality unimpeded by conventional moral constraints, and who often lives with a headlong abandon. One thinks of Blake, Byron, Rimbaud, Balzac, Whitman, Picasso, Thomas Wolfe, Norman Mailer. Of course, colossal vital spirits don't always make for great art. Nor does the unrelenting pursuit of experience necessarily mean a life well lived.

The Anglo-American poet Thom Gunn (1929–2004), one of the most respected writers of the second half of the 20th century, was the exuberant promoter of heroic manliness and the impassioned advocate of sexual promiscuity as an honorable calling befitting life's limitless possibilities. Having sex with everyone he could fit into his bedroom

provided “an entrance into all humanity,” or at least into the obliging portion of mankind's male half. Sleeping with this crowd of strangers, he believed, was often the happy preliminary to genuine friendship; he was really out to make the deepest connections, he insisted, and these quite naturally “emerged from tricking in the first place.”

Despite its come-hither subtitle, Michael Nott's new biography of Gunn is thoughtful and judicious in its evaluation of the poet's life and work. He measures Gunn's self-appraisal against the judgments of the men who knew him best—the members of what he called his family, the sometime lovers and the assorted lovers' lovers who formed the matrix of his San Francisco household. And like Gunn himself in his most penetrating moments of reflection, Nott does not shy away from the spots of commonness in the esteemed writer's character. As Gunn wrote in his notebook, well into his fifties, “I am a mediocre person, but neither I nor most people realize this most of the time & do not realize it because of my poetry.” The questions Nott's biography raises but leaves unanswered are whether this self-accusation of Gunn's is sufficiently damning where his behavior is concerned, and whether the personal failure infects the poetry he considered his redemption.

The elder son of a successful London newspaper editor and a bookish, flighty mother, Gunn grew up amid prosperity and emotional disorder. The key event of his youth, when he was 15, delivered the cruelest blow he ever endured: During his mother's separation from her second husband—also an editor, and a hard-drinking bon vivant—she killed herself. Some months later, though, the bereft boy experienced an episode of transformative insight and jubilation, which made him feel capable of overcoming his terrible grief. He was to enjoy four such crucial moments of pellucidity and inspiration in his life; he called them his “Illuminations,” and in a flash they endowed him with a surplus of energy and an all-conquering sense of freedom. These privileged instants assured him he could do whatever he wanted to do. That proved an ambiguous blessing. ►



THOM GUNN, 1929–2004

After obligatory national service in the army, which he hated—he would register as a conscientious objector when his stint in the military was over—Gunn studied English literature at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he began writing in hot earnest, turning out a poem a week during an 18-month stretch. Despite his productivity, and his baptismal immersion in Shakespeare, Cambridge remained an alien place whose alluring innermost sanctuaries he never quite managed to crack. But meeting two fellow students more than made up for anything he might have missed: Tony White, the finest Cambridge actor of that time, a heterosexual who became a fast friend, and Mike Kitay, a handsome American, also of the theater coterie, who became the love of Gunn's life. A letter Gunn wrote at 24 testifies to the fever in his heart: "I love you so passionately,

so utterly, my darling, that I am sure my love will go on existing for ever, when I'm dead—long after that." Gunn would remain faithful—in his fashion.

When Kitay had to return to the States for two years of Air Force duty in San Antonio, Gunn headed off to Stanford, where he would refine his poetic craft under the tutelage of the poet and critic Yvor Winters—the most important teacher he ever had. Winters was an exemplary figure in Gunn's eyes, with "almost all the qualities one could want from a man—lack of cowardice, kindness, intelligence, and toughness." This fundamental decency, combined with brainpower and firm resolve, constituted Gunn's humanist ideal: the highest moral standard available to a man who scorned religious faith.

He tried to live up to it all his life, even as he turned more and more to the addictive excitements of promiscuous

sadomasochistic sex. The evident disconnect there did not appear to trouble him unduly. The tenets of gay liberation that dominated the Sixties and Seventies (Gunn anticipated them in the Fifties) licensed utter sexual freedom, and spelled the end of outmoded binding fidelities and other emotional delicacies. "Nothing human is alien to me" became the motto of the liberated sensibility. Nott spares the reader Gunn's particular proclivities, but a long quotation from Edmund White, noted chronicler of gay mores, details the sporting activities practiced at the New York club the Mineshaft, which Gunn called "the worst (i.e. best) orgy house in the whole world." White's description shows up Dante's lack of imagination.

Gunn spent a miserable year teaching at a college in San Antonio so he could be with Kitay, and then he returned to his studies at Stanford, where Kitay joined him as a drama student. Three years together were enough to deaden their sexual passion for each other, though they would share the same bed for what Gunn called "many, many, many years." The boredom inherent in the commitment stands out in Gunn's words. To live together, almost as though in marriage, Gunn lamented in a letter to Tony White, "is the most crippling choice."

What sort of poetry did Gunn make of his energetic quest for ever more experience? His first two books, *Fighting Terms* (1954) and *The Sense of Movement* (1957), already contained some of his best work. Governed by an intellect fond of elaborate metaphor—some called him a metaphysical poet, after the manner of John Donne—and written in painstakingly regulated rhyme and meter, these poems come off as quite English in form even as Gunn becomes bemused by American subject matter: the disturbing attraction of outlaw bikers, the "posture for combat" of Elvis Presley, the eroticism of city life teeming with "desire that never ends." The best of these poems is "To Yvor Winters, 1955," which speaks of the mentor who bred Airedales and nurtured young poets with beneficent severity, and who taught Gunn the necessity of balancing "Rule and Energy." The closing lines evoke a mind and will hard enough ▶

THE BOOKSHELF

NEW AND UPCOMING RELEASES

by Katherine Howell

In *If You Will It: Rebuilding Jewish Peoplehood for the 21st Century* (Wicked Son, 288 pp., \$28.99), Elliott Abrams, a longtime contributor to **NATIONAL REVIEW**, considers the past, present, and future of American Jews. The October 7, 2023, attack on Israel revealed that the situation of Jews in America was changing. With rising antisemitism, the unraveling of bipartisan political support for Israel, and a weakening of Jewish identity due in part to assimilation and intermarriage, the prospects for American Jewry are uncertain. “Will our children have the knowledge and the will to defend Israel and defend our own community here?” Abrams asks. He writes perceptively about the state of Jewish life in America, and the evolving relationship of American Jews with Zionism and of the United States with Israel. For Abrams, the most important measure of the strength of the Jewish community is not religious practice but whether individual Jews feel that they are part of the Jewish people, which reaches back millennia and encompasses the Jewish state and the global diaspora. The means to forge this connection are knowledge of the Hebrew language and Jewish history, a relationship to the State of Israel, and intentional participation in a Jewish community. Abrams lays out concrete and practical ways to achieve these goals, in the spirit of Theodor Herzl’s promise that “if you will it, it is no dream.”

Justin M. Jacobs is a historian of antiquities and archaeology who is fed up with “simplistic bedtime stories” about how museums assembled their collections. He objects to the prevailing discourse that regards Western museums as illegitimate repositories of the spoils of empire. In *Plunder? How Museums Got Their Treasures* (Reaktion Books, 240 pp., \$25), he shows how that notion is historically inaccurate and imposes a modern ideology—of seeing certain ancient artifacts as priceless national treasures—on people in the past who would have found it alien. *Plunder?* is a scholarly work, but it is the opposite of dry: Jacobs mounts his argument with verve and a relish in dismantling fashionable dogmas. He acknowledges

that some objects in Western museums are in fact plunder: They were taken by soldiers during military campaigns. The vast majority of acquisitions, however, came from diplomatic gifts (notably, the Elgin Marbles), via dealers of antiquities, or from archaeological digs. In all these cases, transactions that benefited both sides were conducted openly: Natives who participated were not dupes of imperialists. Only when elites in countries such as Egypt and Turkey became Westernized did they begin to adopt the Western conception of antiquities as priceless art and to put restrictions on their removal. Ironically, in this sense, “Western scholars dug their own archaeological grave.”

In the introduction to his new book, *Living in Wonder: Finding Mystery and Meaning in a Secular Age* (Zondervan, 288 pp., \$29.99), Rod Dreher quotes a friend: “The world is not what we think it is.” We think we are living in a materialistic, rationalistic universe governed only by the laws of science, but we are not, Dreher argues. There exist order, purpose, mystery, miracles, and means of connecting to the transcendent. Dreher, an Orthodox Christian, makes his case through a mixture of cultural analysis, reporting, and personal testimony. What he calls “re-enchantment” requires learning to see, to pay attention, and to adopt different “ways of knowing” than intellection—through experiences of beauty and the practice of prayer, worship, and spiritual disciplines. Dreher thinks we are entering a post-Christian age molded by technology (“digital life is the new Tower of Babel”), a vacuum in which new forms of religion will spread: neo-paganism, the occult, the pursuit of transcendence through psychedelics, belief in UFOs, the worship of artificial intelligence. He asks Christians to take more seriously their professed belief in angels, demons, and spiritual warfare and provides several discomfiting accounts of possessions, exorcisms, and the like. Dreher is aware that much of his subject matter sounds “crazy” or “woo.” But then again, we are living through a time of “general madness.”

to withstand the inevitability of extinction and to create a life of value in the brief time allotted us:

Though night is always close, complete
negation
Ready to drop on wisdom and emotion,
Night from the air or the carnivorous
breath,
Still it is right to know the force of death,
And, as you do, persistent, tough in will,
Raise from the excellent the better still.

My Sad Captains (1961) introduces a more American Gunn. Formally looser, some of these poems have jettisoned rhyme and meter for syllabics, one step short of free verse. There are notable beauties here. The title poem celebrates formidable men of inexhaustible energy, with the suggestion that this especially includes sexual energy. Each “hot convulsion” only strengthens them, and that accumulating power makes them worthy of permanent honor in Gunn’s firmament: “. . . winnowed from failures, / they withdraw to an orbit / and turn with disinterested / hard energy, like the stars.” The reader can appreciate the artistry of rhetorical main force there, however questionable the object of the poet’s sentiment might seem. Elsewhere the sentiment and expression are unexceptionable. In “Flying Above California,” Gunn admires “the ultimate richness” of his adopted home, where one can see one’s way forward with startling clarity, free of any beguilements: “Sometimes / on fogless days by the Pacific, / there is a cold hard light without break / that reveals merely what is—no more / and no less.”

Gunn was beguiled, however, by the life that was being lived in California, the cool queer life, and his art fell into occasional inanity. Frequent partaking of LSD had the well-known baneful effect, and a slew of poems in *Moly* (1971) explore the expanded reaches of his unfortunate mind. Here, in its entirety, is the silliest, “Listening to Jefferson Airplane (in the Polo Grounds, Golden Gate Park)”: “The music comes and

goes on the wind, / Comes and goes on the brain.” Other acid poems, though more ambitious, are not much more interesting.

The heyday of free and easy pleasure was brought up short by the appearance of the AIDS virus in 1980. While friends and sometime lovers fell in droves as on a battlefield, Gunn took it upon himself to memorialize the new dispensation of mass destruction. *The Passages of Joy* (1982) opens with “Elegy,” for a young man he hardly knew who shot himself in the head: “Even the terror / of leaving life like that / better than the terror / of being unable to handle it.” *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992) secured Gunn’s standing as a moral authority speaking for a ravaged generation. The subject of the day is holocaust: “Lament,” “Terminal,” “To the Dead Owner of a Gym,” “To a Dead Graduate Student,” “The Missing,” “Words for Some Ash.” Gunn remains steadfast in his refusal to consider a supernatural meaning to life and death, as he sets down the physical facts of pain and extinction, with a jaunty departing word for the body’s dissolution and acceptance by the earth and the waters: “Death has wiped away each sense; / Fire took muscle, bone, and brains; / Next may rain leach discontents / From your dust . . .”

The ubiquity of suffering and hard dying helped make a practicing nihilist of Gunn. The moral squalor of his last years—*mediocrity* does not do it justice—is a thing of horror: picking up homeless men for 16-hour sex bouts on speed; intravenous drug use; methamphetamine psychosis. After hammering with all his might and for an amazingly long time to be admitted at death’s door, Thom Gunn died of an overdose at 75, perhaps from a speedball of meth and heroin. Having already suffered the loss of his mother, the person he loved most, Gunn feared outliving Mike Kitay, Nott speculates, and did what he could to avoid doing just that.

As Kingsley Amis once said to Philip Larkin, curmudgeon to curmudgeon, “I suppose it’s all experience, you know, but it’s a pity there had to be so much of it.” Sometimes the curmudgeons are on to something. ●

BOOK REVIEW

False Freedom

RYAN BOURNE

The Road to Freedom: Economics and the Good Society, by Joseph E. Stiglitz
(Norton, 384 pp., \$29.99)

Back in fall 2019, I was invited to Columbia University to discuss progressive economic-policy ideas with French economist Thomas Philippon, Lina Khan (now FTC chairwoman), and former chief economist of the World Bank and Nobel Prize-winner Joseph Stiglitz. Weeks ahead of the panel event, our hosts explained that we’d each have ten to 15 minutes for opening remarks before taking questions from the audience.

On the day, Stiglitz was up first. The cheerful doyen of leftist economics launched into a speech laying out his ideological vision of “progressive capitalism.” About 13 minutes in, however, he realized he wouldn’t finish within his allotted time. Smiling, he dismissed the clock and declared, “I’m going to use the power I have right now to speak just a little bit over.” He went on for over 30 minutes in total, leaving the rest of us to rush through our presentations and extinguishing any opportunity for a Q&A.

I thought about this while reading Stiglitz’s latest book, *The Road to Freedom: Economics and the Good Society*. His central thesis is that “the Right”—into which he lumps everyone from old-school conservatives to libertarians—has a faulty conception of freedom. We non-leftists apparently don’t acknowledge that just as one person’s excess speaking time eats into that of another panelist’s, so does one person’s supposed freedom impinge on another’s more often than we’d admit. This trite observation that “no man is an island” is justification, Stiglitz supposes, for extensive government adjudication of our lives, particularly in economic affairs.

Caricaturing fellow Nobel-winning economists Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek as proponents of crude, unadulterated laissez-faire (a bizarre misinterpretation of their work), Stiglitz argues that it's dangerous to perceive freedom as synonymous with the absence of government coercion. Not only does it lead to bad outcomes, but thinking that way inculcates selfish attitudes. Instead, Stiglitz wants us to understand that "unregulated, unfettered markets" aren't even theoretically efficient and, indeed, are often exploitative and destructive and play upon human vulnerabilities in ways that harm human well-being broadly understood.

Showing mathematically that free markets are not perfectly efficient, and that people aren't always rationally self-interested, is insufficient to inform us about what public policy should do or could achieve.

Given the pervasive existence of negative externalities, misinformation, market imperfections, and the suffering of the poor within "free markets," Stiglitz thinks we need a more positive conception of liberty—one that considers opportunity-enhancing supports and public goods provided by the government as pro-freedom. In short, he argues that a benevolent state can make us freer, on net, by taxing, spending, and regulating to make the poor richer ("freedom to act"), provide social security ("freedom from want and fear"), and expand opportunity (freedom to live up to one's potential). This coercion for the greater good will protect us against various market failures and exploitation. It's the "freedom" that Vice President Kamala Harris promises on the campaign trail.

Why does Stiglitz try to redefine "freedom" rather than just use other existing words such as, say, "wealth," or "opportunity," or even "economic welfare" for these ambitions? Well, because he thinks that "freedom" resonates with people and that the

libertarian-conservative conception of it has unfairly dominated our politics since the "neoliberal" revolution of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. To read Stiglitz, in fact, you would think we'd seen minimalist government since the early 1980s, driving economic failure, climate-change destruction, and, ultimately, the economic disappointment that he thinks is fueling populist authoritarianism. Achieving his vision of real freedom requires "progressive capitalism," Stiglitz concludes, by which he means a much more expansive form of social democracy and the regulatory state.

Stiglitz is without question one of the greatest theoretical economists of all time. But showing mathematically that free markets are not perfectly efficient, and that people aren't always rationally self-interested, is insufficient to inform us about what public policy should do or could achieve.

There are glaring logical problems with Stiglitz's simplistic ideological framing. First, as the liberal commentator Matt Yglesias documented recently, it's simply untrue that the last four decades have seen the "unfettered" markets of Stiglitz's conception. Environmental regulations such as the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and the Endangered Species Act are still on the books, land-use regulations have expanded, and we've seen extensive corporate welfare, including the bailouts associated with the financial crisis. Yes, the 1970s deregulations of price and entry controls have endured, corporate-tax rates have fallen, and, until recently, tariffs tumbled globally. But the world we live in is hardly a libertarian policy utopia.

Indeed, in an extensive table that's supposed to draw out how his prescriptions differ from the status quo, Stiglitz repeats that the "neoliberal" approach to most theoretical problems is overwhelmingly to "leave it to the market," with disastrous consequences. "Progressive capitalist policies," we are told, would instead include environmental regulation, industrial policies, and financial regulation to deal with externalities; investment in public goods; product disclosure, consumer and labor regulations, and class-action lawsuits to deal with imperfect information; social-insurance programs to deal with unexpected risk; macroeconomic stabilization through fiscal and monetary policies; antitrust laws; and minimum wages, redistribution, and government health-care programs to deal with inequality. If that all sounds familiar, it is because all these policies exist already in our supposedly neoliberal world, although Stiglitz would clearly like them to go much further.

Next, Stiglitz's commitment to proving that inefficient markets are behind all the world's ills leads him to propagate a narrative about recent events that obviously ain't so. He tells us, for example, that recent inflation was all due to supply shocks, shifting demand patterns after lockdowns, and corporate price-gouging, not "an excess of aggregate demand"—or, in English, too much government stimulus. What we really needed to avoid the sharp rise in prices, apparently, was not tighter monetary policy in 2021 and 2022 but more "resilience," which imperfect free and open markets will always fail to deliver.

Of course, this narrative is at odds with basic facts about recent inflation. Though it's true that at times pandemic supply-chain issues and international gas prices increased the price level, total spending on final goods and services (so-called nominal GDP) was until recently 9 percent above its pre-pandemic trend, a vast "excess" of stimulus that can almost entirely explain the above-target inflation we've lived through. Quite simply: The inflationary burst wouldn't have been possible without the overly loose macroeconomic policies we saw in the first three years of the pandemic. ►

In making the case for the market's lack of "resilience," in fact, Stiglitz chooses the peculiar example of the 2022 baby-formula crisis, when the U.S. suffered shortages of infant-powder formula after a large-scale recall by Abbott, a major supplier. Was this worrying time for parents really a case of free markets' delivering insufficient capacity to meet need—a market failure? Well, no. In fact, government policies (tariffs, tariff-rate quotas, and FDA product restrictions) prevented imports from serving the excess U.S. demand, while the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, a welfare program, had consolidated the industry through sole-source contracts with producers. This is an understated but inevitable consequence of the sort of government-led, protectionist industrial policy Stiglitz champions: It makes us *more* vulnerable to domestic shocks by limiting the international diversification of supply.

This gets me to the overarching problem with the book. For all the talk of the many market failures and externalities that exist, and all the wonderful benefits we'd supposedly see with more extensive progressive-capitalist policies to solve them, Stiglitz does not attempt to quantify anything.

There's been a long history of economists running with mathematical proofs of the inadequacy of free markets to justify extensive government intervention. The 19th-century French economist Léon Walras, like Stiglitz, used such logic to argue that socialistic institutions were essential to achieving "free competition."

But in declaring that perfect markets don't exist, Stiglitz tilts at windmills. No real-world market is perfect. The logical leap is to assume that they are perfectible by governments, staffed by the same fallible humans who operate in the private sector. What we surely need in the messy real world is to weigh the costs and benefits of policies, on the margin, drawing on the experience of how government actually functions.

Yet statistical claims appear, on average, just once every eight pages in this text—an extremely low figure for an economics book.

"In his focus on market failure," as development economist William Easterly, a fellow former World Bank employee, has said of Stiglitz, "Joe often misses the bigger problem—the need to roll back the disastrous distortions of markets by government—such as government-induced hyperinflation, negative real interest rates, severe price controls, and punitive taxes on exports."

Easterly was talking about Stiglitz's thinking on economic development, but a similar charge applies here. If markets are so imperfect and governments so benign, then why has the more free-market U.S. maintained its economic preeminence on the technological frontier these past 40 years while Argentina, after decades of policies to obtain social justice and solve market failures, has seen its relative prosperity plummet? Perhaps markets and the basic state supports they undoubtedly require, while not perfect, still work pretty well. ●

BOOK REVIEW

A Catholic Imagination

NICK RIPATRAZONE

The Letters of Seamus Heaney,
selected and edited by Christopher Reid
(Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 848 pp., \$45)

"I was always haunted by the feeling that I might have had a vocation," Seamus Heaney wrote on a postcard in 1996, "and when I saw your man front left I realized how it could all have turned out." He had won the Nobel Prize in Literature the year before and was writing to a childhood friend from St. Columb's College,

their Catholic boarding school for boys in Derry. On the front of the postcard was a reproduction of the painting *La Noce*, by Henri Rousseau, and Heaney was referring to how the priest in the painting looked like him. The observation was classic Heaney: a quip as the vehicle for truth.

Close readers of Heaney's poems have long detected his Catholic sensibility as more than nominal. Now, his letters, selected and edited by Christopher Reid, reveal not merely a Catholic poet but a Catholic man—forged by the religious education of his youth, which he called "earnest and admirable." Beyond his youth, the ritual and culture of Catholicism anchored his elegiac sense.

Covering a time span beginning in 1964 and ending with the text message Heaney sent to his wife minutes before his death in 2013—"Noli timere," Latin for "Don't be afraid"—Reid's selections are comprehensive and presented with useful context. Heaney's correspondence reveals the trajectory of a literary life, from young ambition to a growing sense of his mortality.

In fact, awareness of mortality was endemic to Heaney's Irish Catholicism. "I grow old," he wrote when he was 27. His poetic lodestar was W. B. Yeats, who warned: "That is no country for old men," for "an aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick." As a fount of literature, Catholicism has a power that arises from its having death at its narrative center, not as a mere abstraction but as a daily refrain. This flesh, this blood: It won't last. That Heaney refined his sense of mortality through reading Yeats, his Protestant compatriot, added more layers to his imagination.

"It's not that I have been waiting for to be old," Heaney wrote to the English writer Jane Miller, "more that from early on I was (in Yeats's phrase) 'beginning the preparation for my death.'" The quote is a slight reframing of a line from Yeats's poem "Vacillation": "Begin the preparation for your death / And from the fortieth winter by that thought / Test every work of intellect or faith, / And everything that your own hands have wrought / And call those works extravagance of

breath / That are not suited for such men
as come / Proud, open-eyed and laughing
to the tomb.”

The final line of that stanza perfectly describes Heaney. After the publication of his second book of poems, *Door into the Dark*, he wrote: “I am convinced I am one of the lucky authors who has found an ideal audience.” Yet in the same letter, he added: “My good luck in all spheres of life makes my Irish Catholic consciousness apprehensive that, as my mother would say, ‘something is going to happen,’ but all that occurs is the returning tide of kindness which no one could predict for himself.” That good fortune included his receiving the Somerset Maugham Award, which required international travel. Heaney spent some time on a French farm, where he wrote in “a big shed/garage/playroom,” while birds nested above: “I’ve meditated on a swallow’s flight in various stages of vinous concentration.”

‘Me waiting until I was nearly fifty To credit marvels. Like the tree-clock of tin cans The tinkers made. So long for air to brighten, Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten.’

Perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised when a brilliant writer’s correspondence sparkles, but Heaney’s letters are also sharp. His description of the area: “The village has about six hundred people—a secretive assembly of Basque berets, straw hats, gummy slippers and widow’s weeds. The women spend most of their time just behind the shutters and the men are mostly arising about with fishing rods.” Precise, playful, and poetic.

Yet more than anything else, perhaps, Heaney was solemn: “I’ve always had a weakness for the elegiac.” The gravitas of his poems, even in their lighthearted moments, was remarkable. His letters, likewise, are funereal without a touch of the moribund. He was effusive in praise for his fellow poets and equally generous in his words of consolation. He wrote of faith as offering comfort yet voiced some

resignation about the limits of his own belief: “There are times when we wish we could use the word ‘pray’ without hesitation.”

I read that statement as the genuine lament of one who has fallen away from belief, and yet recognizes its grace. Heaney’s generation of poets and writers were perhaps the last who arose from such a spiritual architecture. The foundation permeates his sensibility and his references. In another letter, he quoted from “The Flower,” by George Herbert: “And now in age I bud again, / After so many deaths I live and write; / I once more smell the dew and rain, / And relish versing.”

One of those deaths was that of his mother. In a letter to the poet Henri Cole, Heaney conveyed his thanks for Cole’s handling of the topic in a feature he’d written: “I also greatly appreciate your delicacy and discretion in asking about the non-communion taking and so on.”

Heaney did not take the Eucharist at his mother’s funeral Mass, and the decision stayed with him. The border between faith and doubt was a precipice for him, likely sharpened by nostalgia. (Channeling James Joyce, he once wrote, “I always loved Holy Week when I was an adolescent,” feeling “ascetic and rhapsodic, all bulb and bloom.”) In a 1996 letter to poet Ted Hughes, Heaney described his trip to Santiago de Compostela, where he attended an ordination Mass. He was moved: “Litanies in Latin, Gregorian chant, murmurous responses—the whole underlife of my childhood and teens rallied and wept for itself.” A storm raged around the cathedral, causing Heaney to note the poignancy of the moment: “It was potent because there is just enough ‘living faith’ around the place to make you feel the huge collapse that has

taken place at the centre of the Christian thing.”

Heaney’s elegiac sense extended to his politics. When contacted in 2002 for comment on current affairs, he responded: “I feel I’ve talked myself out on this art and politics topic. It’s forever new and forever old and there are only individual solutions to it.” We should not read this as a stance of avoidance. Heaney longed for “the truth—artistic as well as moral truth.” That’s what “counts,” he wrote. “That’s what people want, and they recognize it not in the volume or the message, but in the pitch of the tuning, the emotional urgency of what’s at stake.”

In youth, his “consciousness was formed, maybe better say dominated, by Catholic conceptions, formulations, pedagogies, prayers, and practices.” That is the language of stricture; of rote instruction. “And yet,” he realized, “in maturity, my growing familiarity with the myths of the classical world and Dante’s *Commedia* (Irish Catholic subculture with cultural ratification) provided an imaginary cosmology that corresponded well enough to the original: poetic imagination proffering a world of light and a world of dark, a shadow world, not so much an afterlife as an after-image of life.”

Heaney’s letters do not reveal a hidden piety. They reveal something perhaps a bit deeper and more complex. As Heaney aged, he wrote that his life had “been a matter of fitting in with those archetypal patterns.” He noticed that in his own poems, he often returned to “ghosts” and “shades” of the self. Consider “Fosterling,” a poem about a painting seen at school, full of “heavy greenness— / Horizons rigged with windmills’ arms and sails.” The memory spurred a short lament for the intervening years: “Heaviness of being. And poetry / Sluggish in the doldrums of what happens.”

Maturity, firmed by a return to the Catholic sensibility of his youth, changed his vision. His return to the past made all things new: “Me waiting until I was nearly fifty / To credit marvels. Like the tree-clock of tin cans / The tinkers made. So long for air to brighten, / Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten.” ●

TV REVIEW

Artificial Imagination

MARTHA BAYLES

Sunny's garbled storytelling doesn't succeed in making AI loveable

In 2023, the fears of writers, actors, directors, and more skilled technicians of losing their jobs to artificial intelligence resulted in a monthslong strike that shut down much of Hollywood. Those fears have been somewhat assuaged by new union contracts promising retraining, protections against the theft and misuse of words and images, and other provisional safeguards. But the deeper danger of human creativity being replaced by algorithmic processes has hardly disappeared. Indeed, the signs of its happening are already apparent, if you know where to look.

One place to do so is *Sunny*, a stylish new series on the streaming service Apple TV+, which purports to explore the question of whether *generative* AI (the production of prose, images, and music

on command) can lead to *general* AI (humanlike consciousness, sentience, and free will).

The question dates back to the 1921 play *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)*, by the Czech writer Karel Čapek. A devout Catholic, Čapek derived the word “robot” from *robotá*, Czech for “forced labor.” And his play about mechanical slaves becoming *conscious* enough to rebel against their human masters, but lacking the *conscience* to stop short of annihilation, set the template for a million spin-offs.

Sunny is based on one such spin-off, a 2018 novel called *The Dark Manual*, by Colin O'Sullivan, an Irish writer residing in Japan. He recently described the book as “a futuristic, Japan-set story of an Irishwoman battling against AI forces, her foe in particular a home robot which causes her endless frustration.” A major theme, O'Sullivan added, is “nature versus technology.”

The Irishwoman in *The Dark Manual* is Suzie, an expat living in Kyoto whose husband, a Japanese tech engineer named Masa, was recently killed in a plane crash, along with their young son. The robot, called “Sunny,” is a gift from ImaTech, the fictional Big Tech company that employed Masa and is also the villain of the piece. The novel starts with Suzie reacting to the robot with anger and horror, not just to its ingratiating offers to serve her but to its smarmy attempts to become her friend.

The Apple TV+ series departs from this scenario in a number of ways. First, Suzie (played by Rashida Jones) is not Irish but American. Second, her initial reaction to the robot is negative, but by the end of Episode 2, while lying awake in bed and overwrought with grief for her husband and son, she invites the robot to lie down beside her. It does so, and when Suzie asks, “Are you breathing?” it explains, “Just a sound effect. I thought you might like it.” Suzie does like it, and with the robot's hand resting on her hip, she falls peacefully asleep.

Third, the robot in O'Sullivan's novel is an ominous, bullet-shaped object, black with unblinking red eyes, that no human being would find comforting. In the series, by contrast, “Sunny” is a shiny-white, four-foot-tall knockoff of an actual robot, called “Pepper,” that was launched with great fanfare in 2014 by the Japanese conglomerate SoftBank. Touted as “one of the first humanoid robots able to ‘read’ emotions,” Pepper was discontinued in 2021 because of weak demand. One reason, put forward by British robotics expert Noel Sharkey, was that a large segment of the public resented being told Pepper was “a bright cognitive being that could hold conversations,” when in fact it was “mostly remote-controlled.”

Ironically, the “bright cognitive” robot in the Apple TV+ series is also remote-controlled. A24, the hip New York production company that created



THE TITLE CHARACTER, VOICED BY JOANNA SOTOMURA, IN *SUNNY*

the series, worked with the celebrated special-effects company Wētā Workshop to program the voice and motion-captured body of the American actress Joanna Sotomura into the “Sunny” we see on the screen. Like Pepper, Sunny is really just a digitally enhanced puppet.

Apart from a few throwaway lines about Sunny being a machine, the next eight episodes in the series depict “her” as a character every bit as loveable as the androids and droids in *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*. But this is not your grandparents’ science fiction. For a robot to be loveable in 2024, it is not enough to be conscious, sentient, and conscientious. She must also be badass. Unlike Suzie and her new friend Mixxy, a green-haired denizen of the city’s seedier neighborhoods, Sunny does not say “f****” in every other sentence. Nor does she chug hard liquor or dabble in kinky sex. But make no mistake: This robot is just as badass as her besties.

Then there are the villains. In O’Sullivan’s novel, the villains are embedded in ImaTech. In the Apple TV+ series, Big Tech is let off the hook, and the villains are a clan of *yakuza* (Japanese gangsters) whose intrigues, bloody deeds, and tattooed torsos take up far too much screen time.

These gangster clichés serve only to garble further the already garbled plot, which in addition to an excess of twists and turns includes flashbacks and flash-forwards of scenes and events that either did not happen or are not going to happen. This inclusion of multiple narratives was all the rage in the bad old days of postmodern literary theory. And it lives on in the world of interactive gaming, where gamers feel empowered (I guess) by being able to choose the next plot twist from a smorgasbord of possibilities. But as the writer Nicholas Carr pointed out years ago, to fiddle with a story while it is being told is to break its spell and turn it into a “contraption.”

Ironically, the contraption called *Sunny* contains a poignant and timely story that, if told straightforwardly, would have made for a fine series. Condensed into a long flashback that takes up the whole of Episode 8, the story begins with Masa as a boy being coldly

rejected by his father. Not only that, but Masa’s mother, who loves him, inexplicably refuses to confront her husband about the pain he is causing the boy. The situation lasts into Masa’s early manhood, when his father refuses to see him while on his deathbed.

After that blow, Masa (played by the popular Japanese actor Hidetoshi Nishijima) becomes a *hikikomori*, the Japanese term for a troubled young person, usually a man, who withdraws into his room for years. In the words of Yuki, an older man who is a friend of the family, Masa spent those years “wearing his loneliness like a cape.” But then Yuki (played by the esteemed Jun Kunimura) reveals that Masa is his son, born of a love affair that Masa’s mother struggled, probably in vain, to conceal from her husband. Hearing this, Masa finds that his burden is lightened, and he agrees to leave his room and sequester in Yuki’s lakeside retreat.

And there, in a lovely house full of Yuki’s unfinished projects, Masa’s anger changes to curiosity and then to delight at discovering a trash-collecting robot invented by Yuki that unfortunately cannot tell trash from non-trash. In a charming sequence that could almost make me love AI, Masa teaches the trash robot how to do its job and, along the way, how to think like a human being. Flush with this triumph, Masa decides to devote his career to creating robots that can coax *hikikomori* out of their shells.

This backstory has plenty of resonance in a world suffering an epidemic of loneliness. Because it does not appear in O’Sullivan’s novel, I’m guessing that, like the *yakuza* gangsters, it is an add-on intended to turn the novel’s anti-AI message into a pro-AI one—if we overlook that Masa is saved not by a robot but by a wise and kind man who also happens to be his father.

I’m also guessing that the smart people at A24 realized that if the series’ pro-AI message were too blatant, it might provoke a backlash. Or maybe, more chillingly, they just threw up their hands and prompted some AI software to mash a bunch of market-tested elements together, on the assumption that no one would care. ●

FILM REVIEW

One-Man Army

ROSS DOUTHAT

Rebel Ridge’s action-movie vigilantism can’t quite square with its moral vision

If you aspire to make a good left-wing movie, you have my sympathies. Your first challenge is that most people in contemporary Hollywood share your politics, and political movies made inside an ideological bubble tend to be crude, cardboard, and artistically inert.

Then your second challenge is that the big screen has a way of undermining the progressive intentions with which many films are made. You set out to make an anti-war movie and discover that the camera loves combat even if you’re trying to condemn its waste and horror. You introduce a right-wing bad guy and then watch him walk away with the movie, Gordon Gekko-style. You script an action movie where the hero is up against a set of Republican-coded villains, evil corporations or sinister defense contractors, and still the iconography of your story—the lone hero, armed and dangerous, taking the law into his own hands—may end up feeling more Gadsden-flag libertarian than conventionally liberal.

Rebel Ridge, the taut, slow-burn Netflix action movie starring Aaron Pierre as a black Marine Corps martial-arts instructor taking on the corrupt police force of a small Louisiana town, is an interesting illustration of what it takes to avoid these traps. It has a message that would be very much at home in the protests around Ferguson, Mo.: a story that indicts not just a few bad cops but larger power structures, a conflict that pits its black hero against a brace of bad white Southerners. With that description, it’s easy to imagine the movie playing as a thudding piece of anti-racist propaganda, or at best a guilty pleasure in the style of the *Shaft* movies. ►



AARON PIERRE IN REBEL RIDGE

But instead of thudding, the story moves more lightly. We start with Pierre's character, Terry Richmond, getting run off the road by a police car while he's biking to a small town to bail his cousin out of jail. (The cousin has served as a state's witness in the past, and Terry assumes that if he's sent to prison he'll meet a snitch's fate.) The cops claim he was evading them, search him, find a bag full of \$36,000 in cash—the bail money, plus some extra to buy a truck and maybe start a hauling business—and come up with a trumped-up justification to confiscate it before sending Terry on his way.

Needing the money, or at least \$10,000 of it for bail, Terry goes up the chain of command to reach the local police chief, Sandy Burnne, played by Don Johnson in full feudal-baron mode. Along the way he picks up an ally in a local courthouse functionary named Summer (AnnaSophia Robb), who helps clue him in on the larger pattern of corruption—involving a sweeping abuse of civil asset forfeiture, a favorite target of would-be police-reformers.

The police chief and the Marine don't exactly hit it off, and Summer has her own issues with local law enforcement. So we get a series of increasingly violent escalations of the civil-asset-forfeiture debate, and eventually the one-man war that you'd expect. Though with the twist that Terry is more a hands-and-fists guy than a marksman, more a disarm-your-enemies type than a stone-cold killer—and a lot of the armaments that he ends up turning against the police are crowd-control technologies, meant to stun and daze and not to kill.

This attempt to avoid conceding too much to vigilantism doesn't completely work, of course: The hero still deals out a *lot* of physical punishment that you, the viewer, are expected to cheer for rather than deplore. But it's an interesting attempt to protect the movie's formal moral vision against the usual action-movie slippage toward vigilante porn.

Similarly interesting is the work the film does to avoid playing as a simple anti-racist parable. Race and the region's racist past are obviously crucial background to the story, but the forfeiture racket is

about money first and foremost; Johnson and Pierre play their scenes as two alpha males in conflict, with the racial difference just one undercurrent, and even the good cops and bad cops aren't precisely whom you would expect on identitarian grounds alone. You can infer a lot of political ideas from the script, but they're there to be drawn out, not delivered as a lecture.

The exception, and the place where the movie is the weakest, is in the details of the underlying criminality: There's no way to explain the logic of civil asset forfeiture without being a bit didactic, and the effort to invent and explain a larger conspiracy around the practice is cumbersome as well.

This is a fundamental challenge that remains for the left-wing filmmaker even when the obvious traps can be avoided. The strongest left-leaning arguments about society's ills involve impersonal powers and structural forces grinding down the individual, and making structural evils cinematic requires more genius than even a good action movie can quite deliver. ●



City Desk

Satiety

T

ime was we would have come back by now from some remote place, to the routine of carousel and customs and cab. Wife and I went to the usual places, and one or two—we were not Bruce Chatwin—unusual ones. Most memorable, not as a destination but as a travel experience, was

the one-hop internal flight in India when at the first hop an electrical problem on the plane required us to overnight. The local hotel was so infernally hot, wife tried sleeping in the bathroom (no better). A sign in the lobby next morning advertised Disco Night. One imagined the *jeunesse dorée* of the neighborhood turning out. Two Indian businessmen warned us away from the breakfast buffet. They shared no common native tongue, though their English was perfect. Since no replacement flight appeared, the four of us shared a car to our destination. It broke down halfway, and the driver who had no idea what to do proved it by opening the hood and twiddling an engine part futilely. One of the businessmen—that was before smartphones—hitched to the nearest village to find another rentable vehicle. The other, who had a humpback, told us his family's firm had been making snuff since "19 aught 7." I am not sure of the 7, but I swear to the "aught," which is what made the incident memorable.

Now the wanderlust is gone. Some of the reason is newfound aversion to travel itself. The *longueurs*, which once vanished from recollection, have lengthened in anticipation; the irritations—dirty goggling students heaving their backpacks, bathrooms unexpectedly down the hall, national cuisines that boast two or three good dishes, which pall after two weeks—have become more irritating. The sights—the reasons to go thousands of miles—have lost allure. I am grateful for the ones I have seen, whether stirring, beautiful, or strange. Some I would not mind seeing again. The shoulders of the woman in that Florentine painting look just like the shoulders of a woman I knew in college; the living woman's are lost to me and to time, but the painting's would still be fresh. But these, and other sights, are literally unattractive. They are things of beauty and forever joys, but they no longer move.

Another lost activity is shopping. Travel gave you images, shopping gave you things, and—since you never bought

everything, or even anything—images of things. To go to a store and flick through the racks; to sit while wife flicked more thoroughly—that opened the eye, pricked the attention. Finding what looked good on you was an exercise in self-definition and performance (an actor prepares). Since what looked good changed with age, if not as often as fashion would have you believe, one had to find it several times. Item: On an East Village side street I bought a Mexican leather jacket. It was black, white, and red, and sported fringe. It suggested (not for real, fashion is never real) foreign bikers. I grew out of it long ago. Only a nerd billionaire with a siliconed second wife would wear such a thing at my age, and he would be wrong. But when mate- and job-seeking are finally done, and you have the face you have earned, what more is there to shop for? Your closet is full anyway; cullings have already enriched the thrift shop. No more costume changes until the hospital.

At a certain point we know what we like. My old friend was a great traveler; he maintained a running competition, a kind of luggage-tag playoff, with a peer. The peer served Liberia down the baseline, my friend returned with Easter Island. But it was this many-miled friend who said, When you have a good thing, run it into the ground.

The first two syllables of satisfaction descend, my phone tells me, from *satis*, Latin for enough. We have enough, we are happy. But the four syllables of satiety also come from *satis*. Enough can be fullness, enough can be good. Esau, whose brother Jacob cheated him out of an inheritance, running into the trickster sibling years later, told him, at least according to the KJV, I have enough: No worries. But maybe satiety is ours not because we have been filled but because we have shrunk. We like the den because we have become badgers.

And new friends? When was the last one? But who will be there when old ones go? ●

Garner the Grammarian



Harris's, Walz's, and Vance's Possessives

W

hat's the rule on forming a singular possessive of a name ending with a sibilant? The answer has always depended on whom you ask.

The Harris campaign has used both *Harris's* and *Harris'*, but their view can't be seen as authoritative. Nor does it matter that Michael Dukakis opines that it should be *Harris'*. He apparently dislikes *Dukakis's*.

It's really a question of "house style"—and whether you're a member of the *Chicago Manual* camp (*Harris's*) or the *AP Stylebook* camp (*Harris'*).

And then there's the question of which camp has the better position.

The issue would have lain dormant if Harris hadn't picked Walz as her running mate, thereby highlighting an anomaly in the AP system, which specifies this: *Do you prefer Harris' speaking style, or Walz's? What? Harris' but Walz's? Really?*

People who yearn for consistency—who like sensible, non-distracting orthography—are understandably bothered by *Harris'* alongside *Walz's*. Let's have some history, which has been notably lacking so far in the journalistic treatments of the issue.

Like so many other literary standards in English, apostrophe use came to be regularized in the 17th and 18th centuries. To illustrate: In Shakespeare's First Folio (1623), only 4 percent of singular possessives (or genitives) were marked with 's. Instead, the possessives looked like plural nouns, without an apostrophe. By the time of the Fourth Folio (1685), the printers had supplied apostrophes pretty consistently for singular possessives. The standard for the singular possessive 's was ensconced: The apostrophe was thought to represent an elision of either the Old English genitive *e* (*Johnes book*) or the first two letters of *his* (*John his book*). It hardly matters today, but English-language historians can't quite agree on what was being elided. We do know, though, that 's was soon normalized for all singular possessive nouns and proper nouns (not pronouns!).

But there were some literary exceptions: *for conscience's sake* and *for goodness' sake*—where the apostrophe alone represented the singular possessive. Some grammarians stated this exception as belonging exclusively to the word *sake*, others as

belonging exclusively to words ending in *ce*. Imagine referring to "J. D. Vance' speech."

It may have been George Glyn Scraggs who, in his book *English Composition* (1802), first expressed the idea that 's might lead to excessive sibilance, or (in his words) "hissing sounds." Hence the rule had exceptions. That's probably the gist of what you learned in school: a rule with exceptions. But what exceptions, precisely, did you learn? How circumscribed were they?

That's worth delving into, because the literature on English composition displays a bewildering variety of exceptions, even to this day. Imagine yourself as a grade-school teacher inculcating into your pupils the method for forming singular possessives. Your students might readily understand an exceptionless rule specifying 's in all circumstances (*a child's book, a building's foundation, James's home, Sophocles's plays, Judas's perfidy*). But that's not what's generally taught.

So what are the exceptions? If we take just post-1900 texts (I consulted more than a hundred), we find 15 different exceptions to the rule that you add 's to form the singular possessive. Each of these variants is supposed to be the sole exception to the rule:

- (1) The 's produces a repetitious hissing sound that is "displeasing to the ear"—a supposed "genitival cacophony" (as with *Demosthenes's susurrations*);
- (2) you're composing poetry;
- (3) the resulting form is difficult to pronounce (*Demosthenes's orations*);
- (4) the word or name ends in *s, ss, ce, or x*;
- (5) the phrase is one of a handful of idioms using *sake*: *righteousness' sake, conscience' sake, goodness' sake*;
- (6) the name is an ancient proper name ending in *es*: *Ceres' rites, Aristides' exile, etc.*;
- (7) the name is either ancient or biblical (*Achilles' heel, Icarus' wings, Moses' law*);
- (8) the name has at least two syllables and ends in *s*;
- (9) you wouldn't pronounce the word as if it had a new syllable because of the possessive ("say the word aloud, both with and without the additional *s*, and then decide which is preferable");

(10) the name ends in *s* or *z* (*Agassiz's headquarters*);

(11) the last syllable of the name is pronounced /*iz*/ (*Bridges's, Moses's*, but *James's, Thomas's*);

(12) the last syllable of the name has more than one sibilant (*Jesus's followers*);

(13) “the word ends in two sibilant sounds (*ch, j, s, sh, or z*) separated only by a vowel sound” (presumably *Gorsuch's book?*);

(14) a noun ending in *s* is “followed immediately by a noun beginning with *s*, or else the noun ends in *ses*, or *sses* or *sses*, or in *sis* or *siss* or *ssis*, or in *xes*”;

(15) a polysyllabic name has a last syllable that (a) begins and ends with an *s* or *s* sound and (b) is unaccented.

I'm not making this up. And believe it or not, all those versions can be found in textbooks. Good luck sorting it out. Which exception would you be willing to teach?

The *AP Stylebook* decided in 1953 to “simplify” by specifying that the apostrophe alone—without the extra *s*—should be used for words and names ending in *s*. (The *s* is essentially treated as if it were a plural.) Gradually, this position became a cherished tenet of most newspaper journalists. For many, it's akin to an unshakable religious belief—so much so that its adherents see no problem with *Harris's* alongside *Walz's*.

Meanwhile, the *Chicago Manual* decided in 2010 to “simplify” by stating a rule without exceptions: Add *'s* to form all names as singular possessives—even possessives for ancient names (*Demosthenes's*).

We haven't even touched on plural possessives, where all the authorities agree but there is widespread confusion within the general population. The correct forms are *the Harrises's house*, *the Walzes's investments*, *the Vances's travels*. Doubtless the *Harrises*, the *Walmazes*, and the *Vances* agree on this much. Copy editors certainly do.

Which brings us back to the Harris campaign and how best to attract the votes of America's copy editors—all 250 of them. My recommendation would be to make no official statement about the campaign's preference for *Harris's* or *Harris'*. Stay silent until after the election. Otherwise,

the campaign risks alienating either the Chicago camp or the AP camp.

But if they must choose, I'd urge the Chicago preference, which is also NR's preference: *Harris's*. And by the way, this month the newly revised, 18th edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style* is being released. As a contributing author to that tome—I wrote chapter 5, “Grammar and Usage”—I heartily recommend that you acquire several copies. There's hardly a better gift for a college student, or even a talented high-schooler. Who cares today if it might not get Dukakis's endorsement? ●

POETRY

BY REX WILDER

Writing You Now

It's fragrant here, these flowers left for dead.
My desk's a suspension. I'm in a dark way,
As half of Earth is sad, despite the light ahead.

On social media, even preachers preach
Moderation. Eat cake, but not every day.
Smells wrong. Fear of obsession: Why teach

That to our kids? Abstention empties a bay.
Why, when my life is whole at last, take a break?
To know myself? Not for my heart's sake.

The surf is dogged in its quest to reach
The sand. Sea's apprentice, I request no hours off.
Why should I brook interruption to love?

Happy Warrior

Made-Up Memories

S

usan Glasser, of the *New Yorker*, embodies a very strange creature you find only in the legacy media: a consummate Beltway insider who nevertheless has no idea how politics actually work.

Glasser isn't dumb, per se. She's very smart on paper. Harvard and all that; writer of *Serious Books*. But to see her talk on the Sunday shows or—my word—to read her tweets is to witness a kind of Joy

Behar-level incurious liberalism paired with a childlike ingenuousness about the motives of real-live political actors.

The Behar bit is best evinced by her seemingly inexhaustible ability to be scandalized by the verbal improvisations of Donald Trump. Nearly a decade after most observers learned that the key to Trump is to not think any harder about the things he says than *he* did before he said them, Glasser hasn't run out of pearls to clutch.

The guilelessness bit is evinced by her Ron Burgundian ability to repeat the official Democratic Party line on any conceivable issue or topic without a stutter, much less reflection.

This combination of taking both Trump and his enemies at their word makes her a kind of Mean Gene Okerlund, the late ringside announcer of the World Wrestling Federation, whose job was to sell the suspension of disbelief to audiences by treating both “face” and “heel” as if the body slams and steel folding chairs were real and not what wrestlers and carnies call “works.”

The difference is that, unlike Mean Gene, Glasser never gave us reason to suppose she was in on the act. Until recently.

You see, Glasser wrote a post-Trump-Harris-debate column in the *New Yorker* that numbered among the “crazy and unhinged” things claimed by Trump that “the Vice-President ‘wants to do [taxpayer-funded] transgender operations on illegal aliens that are in prison.’”

“What the hell was he talking about?” Glasser wonders in the column, before answering her own question: “No one knows.”

Ironically, in this case Trump *wasn't* freestyling, and Glasser *should've* taken him at his word. Because as no less than CNN soon after reported, Harris expressed exactly that view in a 2019 ACLU questionnaire.

The *Washington Free Beacon's* bulldogging correspondent Joe Simonson pressed Glasser and her editors on whether they would correct the column. Glasser dodged and evaded, and ultimately the *New Yorker*, once famed for the rigors of its

“fact-checking process,” chose to stand pat, stating it saw no need for a correction.

That's not the earnest naïveté I thought I'd seen radiating from Glasser. It's something a bit more complex, and sinister.

A number of commentators have talked about the affair as an example of left-wing policy so extreme that the Left's own confrères assume discussion of it is right-wing *misinformation*.

Are some of the people who do try to disqualify discussion of these very real policy positions just lying for cynical reasons? Surely. But I think it's both deeper and more pathological than that.

I've adopted a semi-obscure term of art from Martin Heidegger, the “always-already,” to describe the difficulty the Left has at looking backward into its own past and, indeed, even at understanding that such a past existed or could have. The Left merely wakes up each day “always-already” on the right side of history. To give an example in the living memory of many teenagers, leading-light Democrats didn't all switch positions on gay marriage around 2013, they were always-already in favor of it. (Though maybe, with Dick Cheney's endorsement of Kamala Harris, they'll now be able to acknowledge that he beat Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton to “love is love” by some years.)

This selective goldfish memory is bound up with a thoroughly postmodern theory of truth and its functions. The overriding credo of which is that what's true today is what's useful today or, as the left-wing political theorist Richard Rorty put it, that the “truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with saying.”

The now constant command of discourse police to “read the room” is another summary of and slogan for this way of thinking.

Of course, Trumpism has brought a version of this into the GOP. (“This didn't happen and it's awesome that it did” is just as much a feature of MAGA as it is of the woke Left in recent years.) But it's actually *antithetical* to the conservative view, rightly understood. Which is at its core about unchanging human nature, ancient and eternal truths, and the preservation of the venerable against dangerous novelties. ●

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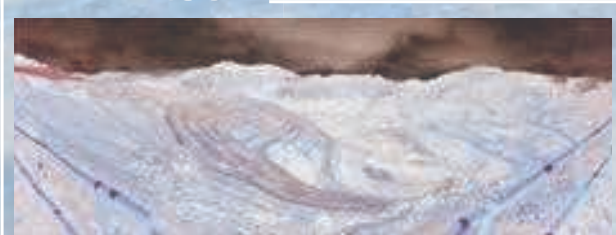
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The federal government's expansive landholdings deprives Utah of a significant amount of sovereignty compared to other states. This means Utah is unable to actively manage more than two-thirds of the land within its borders, to the detriment of recreation, local economies, and resources.

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