

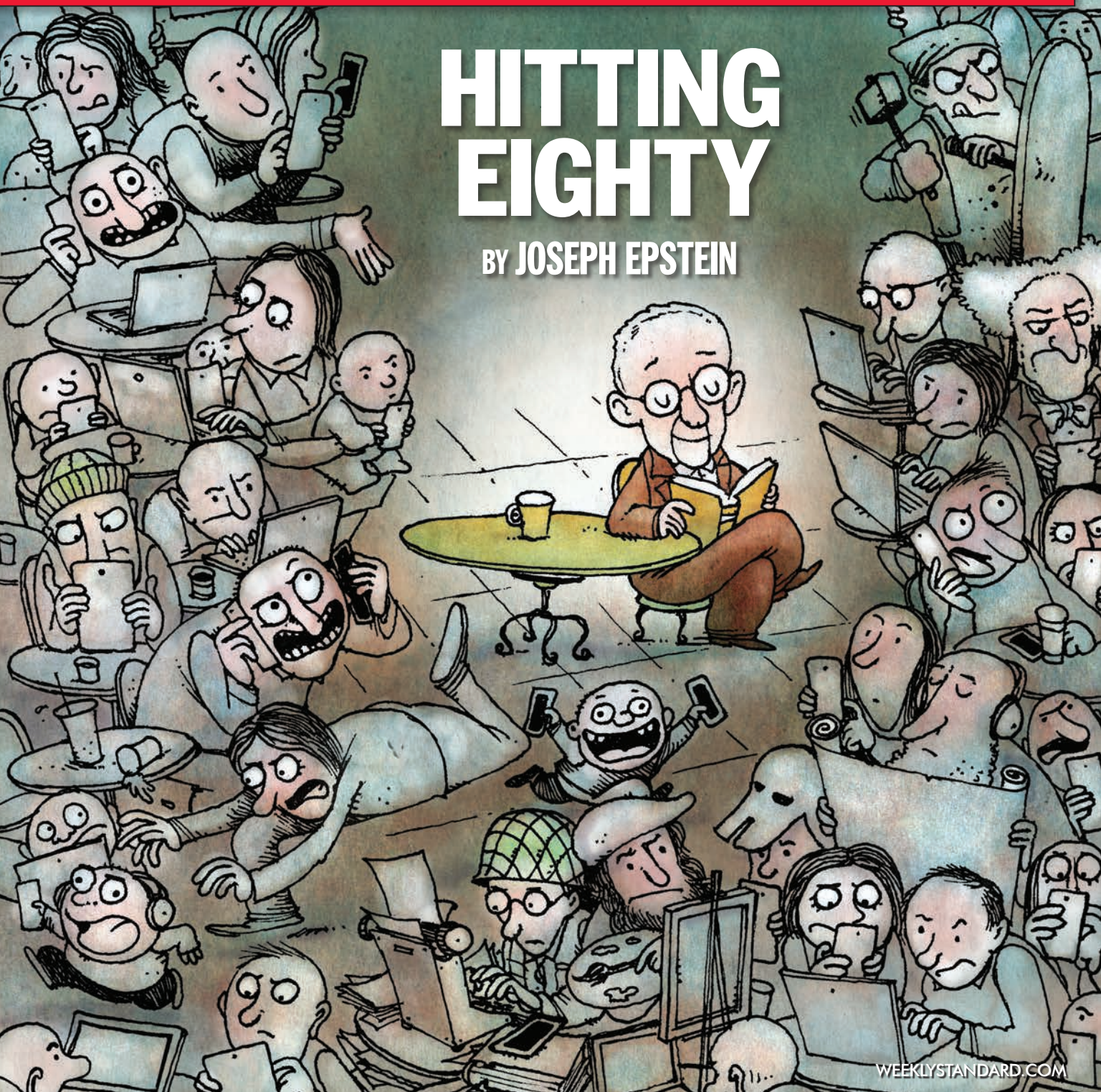


the weekly

# Standard

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## HITTING EIGHTY

BY JOSEPH EPSTEIN

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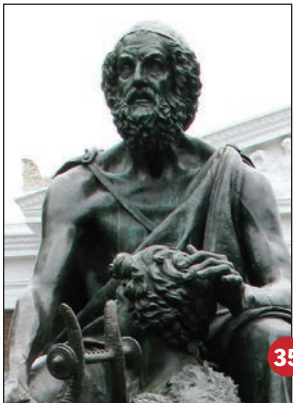


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# Be Careful What You Wish For

As readers know, THE SCRAPBOOK is a longtime connoisseur of the Law of Unintended Consequences. And this election year has furnished more than a few examples.

Case in point: the Electoral College. Since Donald Trump won the electoral, but not the popular, vote in November, the left has been especially agitated about this “vestige of the founding era . . . when slavery was the law of the land,” as the *New York Times* put it in its demand for abolition last week. Indeed, so serious is left-wing grievance with the Electoral College these days that no less a figure than former president Josiah Bartlet (actor Martin Sheen) from

TV’s *West Wing* joined other celebrities in publicly pleading with electors to change their votes. And some did. But not in the way that President Bartlet might have expected: Two Trump electors—so-called “faithless electors”—defected, but so did five Clinton electors.

It is at this point that THE SCRAPBOOK feels constrained to issue a solemn warning to those disappointed Democrats who wish to jettison the Electoral College: Be careful what you wish for. For abolition would require a constitutional amendment, and we can think of two modern amendments—both of which were rushed into the Constitution under political

pressure—that neatly illustrate the Law of Unintended Consequences.

The first is the 22nd Amendment (1947), which limits the president of the United States to two terms. Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was elected to four terms, had died in 1945, and Republicans, who captured both houses of Congress in 1946, were determined to ensure that no future FDR would serve more than eight years as president. So the amendment was rushed through the legislative process and swiftly ratified by the requisite number of states. But of course, the very next Republican president was the immensely popular Dwight D. Eisenhower, who might easily have won a third term in 1960 had he chosen to run—and not been barred by the 22nd Amendment.

Then there’s the 25th Amendment (1965), a product of longstanding concern about presidential disability and the immediate circumstances following the assassination of John F. Kennedy. When Kennedy was killed, he was succeeded by his vice president, Lyndon B. Johnson. In the days before the 25th Amendment, however, there was no provision for the vice-presidential vacancy left when a president died. So the constitutional order of succession after the 55-year-old Johnson (who had suffered a serious heart attack a decade earlier) was the 71-year-old speaker of the House, John McCormack, and the 86-year-old Senate president pro tempore, Carl Hayden. The chattering classes of the day—and in particular, the Democratic 89th Congress—considered this geriatric scenario and collectively shuddered.

So the 25th Amendment, like the 22nd, was rushed through confirmation and ratification. It codified the issue of presidential disability—that is to say, what to do when a living president was unable to perform his duties—and in the case of a vice-presidential vacancy, provided

## Not a Parody

The Washington Post

Energy and Environment | Opinion

### The electoral college is thwarting our ability to battle global warming

By Todd Cort December 19

Former Vice President Al Gore acknowledges spectators in front of a poster of his starring documentary film "An Inconvenient Truth" on global warming before its 2007 screening during the Japan Premier at a theater in Tokyo. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara)

Who (you might ask) is David Brearley?

Brearley plays a critical, and entirely accidental, role in climate change because of his position as the chair of the Committee on Postponed Parts within the Constitutional

for the presidential appointment of a new vice president, subject to Senate confirmation.

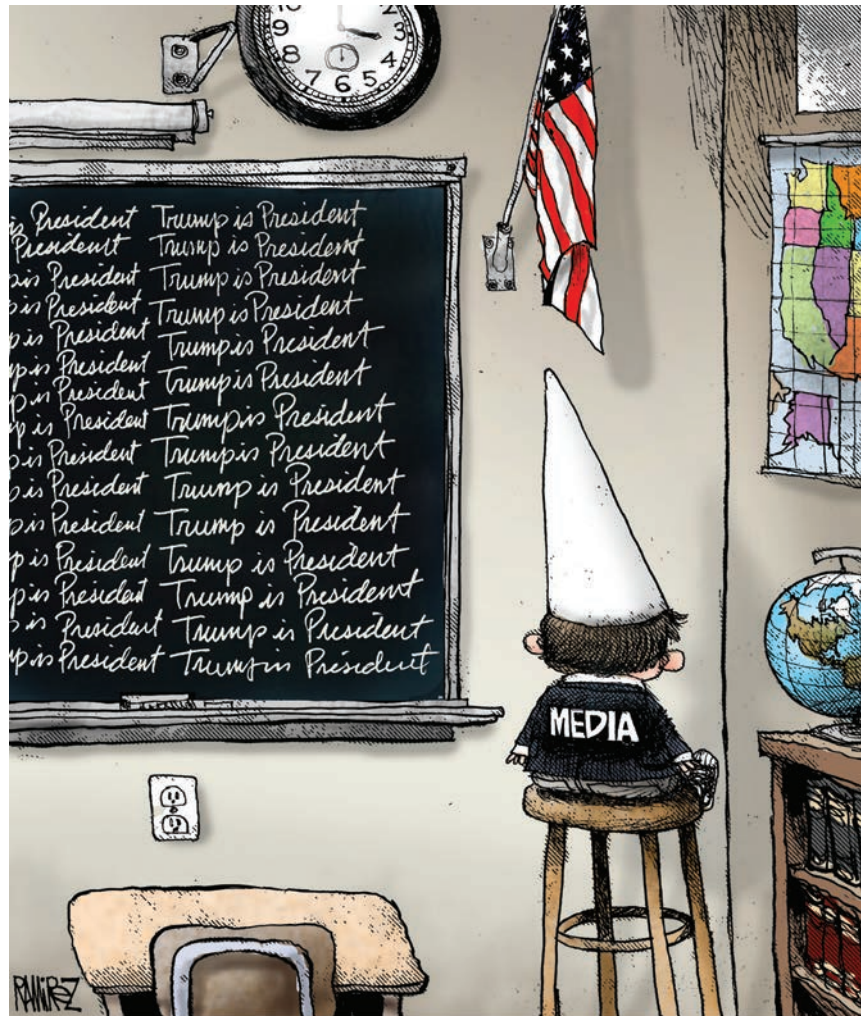
Almost immediately, it was put to the test. In 1973, Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned from office and, in accordance with the new 25th Amendment, President Richard Nixon appointed Representative Gerald Ford to succeed him. In the following year, however, Nixon himself resigned the presidency, pushing Ford into the White House. Whereupon Ford, in his turn, appointed New York governor Nelson Rockefeller to be the new vice president. And so, less than a decade after the adoption of the 25th Amendment, neither of the two senior executive officials of the United States government had been elected by a vote of the American people.

To be sure, Ford and Rockefeller were both estimable statesmen, and the Republic prevailed. But the interesting sequence of events in the wake of the Watergate scandal was not exactly what the authors of the presidential-disability amendment had in mind.

Moreover, there was an ironic postscript. The 25th Amendment itself had been prompted by the frightening prospect of the elderly Speaker McCormack succeeding the dynamic President Johnson in the White House. But when Johnson eventually died (1973), McCormack attended his funeral—and indeed, survived LBJ by another seven years. So THE SCRAPBOOK is fully confident that should progressives ever get their wish and discard the Electoral College, the very next Democratic candidate for president will lose the popular vote but win the electoral vote. ♦

## The Old College Try

As Orwell memorably put it, sometimes the “restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men.” In that spirit, THE SCRAPBOOK will reiterate to our liberal friends: Donald Trump is going to be president of the United States. We don’t have high hopes that they’re listening to



FLUNKED OUT of ELECTORAL COLLEGE.

us, however. Consider the sequence of events since November 8.

First, Democrats pushed futile recount efforts in three states in the hopes, apparently, of some kind of divine intervention. The effort was spearheaded by the Green party, but Hillary Clinton aides participated in the recount in Wisconsin and were quietly supportive otherwise. Trump actually gained votes in Wisconsin, the one state where a recount was completed. The only thing notable about the Michigan and Pennsylvania recounts was that we learned 37 percent of Detroit’s precincts counted more ballots than the number of voters reported by poll workers.

When that ridiculous effort failed, Democrats moved on to the next target: the Electoral College. To hear liberals tell it these days, the Electoral College is almost as sinister as the Fugitive Slave Act. Given the fact that they’ve spent the last year fettering Alexander Hamilton on Broadway as an enlightened proto-liberal, they seem to be suffering cognitive dissonance regarding the man’s contribution to the brilliant invention that preserved federalism in national elections, lest we all be ruled by the whims of voters in California.

Obama, in a classic display of the quasi-royal arrogance that will not be missed, declared at a recent press

conference that “the Electoral College is a vestige, it’s a carryover from an earlier vision of how our federal government was going to work that put a lot of premium on states.” We’ll side with Hamilton here, thank you very much.

The disparaging of the Electoral College had to be briefly put on hold, of course, lest it get in the way of flattering and seducing the electors. Liberals want to get their way now. So without pausing a nanosecond to reflect on the hypocrisy of what they were about to do, they suddenly decided that the Electoral College was an important safeguard to keep irrational hoi polloi from installing a crazy despot. Harvard law professor Lawrence Lessig made the astonishing claim that as many as 20 Republican electors were considering voting against Trump. Electors were both cajoled and harassed as part of a highly organized campaign that the media treated as if it were an honest-to-God grassroots effort. Cable news hounds dined out on the breathless drama in the days before the electors cast their ballots.

Well, the Electoral College came and went, Trump won handily, and in one of those delicious ironies, more electors defected from Clinton than from Trump. At that point, humiliated Clinton aides blasted the silly effort—one even terming it a “coup attempt.” But this was disingenuous. Days after the vote, *Politico* reported that Clinton aides had been working behind the scenes on the obviously doomed effort to provoke an Electoral College revolt. We shudder to think what a national scandal it would have been if the shoe had been on the other foot, with Trump aides and supporters blowing millions of dollars on pointless recounts and efforts to subvert the Electoral College, lest Hillary become president.

THE SCRAPBOOK well understands that people are nervous about a Trump presidency and sympathizes up to a point. But here’s some free advice for our liberal friends: If holding President Trump accountable is even half as important as you say, you can’t spend the next four years

acting just as petulant as you imagine him to be. ♦

## A Great Conversation

As you may have noticed from the date on the cover of this issue, all of us at THE WEEKLY STANDARD will be taking a week off (though the digital galley slaves at *weeklystandard.com*—visit early and often!—are going to power through the holiday season). THE SCRAPBOOK is self-indulgently ecumenical when it comes to celebrations and looks forward to airing Festive grievances, lighting Hanukkah candles, and singing Christmas carols. Afterwards, we will spend a few days self-medicating our various anxiety disorders with fruitcake, washed down with leftover eggnog and mulled wine, before returning to your mailboxes week after next.

But enough about us. If you’re seeking to fill your SCRAPBOOK void in the days ahead, we cannot recommend highly enough the most recent in the series of Conversations with Bill Kristol (available, as always, at [conversationswithBillKristol.org](http://conversationswithBillKristol.org)). It’s a return engagement with Harvard’s Harvey Mansfield, whom Bill tasked with explaining “the meaning of Trump from the point of view of political science, political philosophy.” Here’s a very small taste:

A kind of Machiavellian love of what is sensational—what makes a splash; what catches attention. That’s what Trump gets by being outrageous. And that’s what Hamilton tries to, you could say, “tame” by giving constitutional expression to it. Enabling a person with ambition to be an outstanding person and contribute to the common good, instead of being dismissed or even exiled because, because as one person with his own ambition, he’s a danger to the republic.

So these ambitious, dangerous individuals are turned to good account in the Constitution; but they’re checked, partly by the other powers—Congress and the judiciary—but also, partly by the other ambitious people. Ambition is something that permeates our politics, I think. American politics is mainly defined as the “politics of contentious ambition,” I would say. ♦

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## Scared Straight

For several years I enjoyed an affiliation with a “lifestyle” magazine that specialized in the toys and enthusiasms of the well-to-do. As a result my email address fell into the twitchy fingers of several thousand—or so it seems to me—public relations firms with names like Chill Strategics and ChikLixPR. My relationship with the magazine ended before the magazine itself died a lingering death, but I’m not telling the PR people that. Their emails, pitching me stories about complicated kitchenwares, advanced mindfulness techniques, or a rare yak-skin cowling custom-designed for one of my private planes, are by far the most interesting communications anyone ever sends me.

“Hi, Andrew!” the flack will write. They are so chipper, these people. “Hope this finds you well! Just circling back on my earlier note about the most innovative . . .” There’s poignancy to the arrangement: a young person being paid to force herself to implausible levels of enthusiasm so she can exploit my nonexistent affiliation with a magazine that died years ago in order to get me to write an article I have no intention of writing about a subject I’m not particularly interested in or qualified to write about. Can you think of a better summary of modern journalism?

Once in a while, though, a flack will hit the sweet spot of this one-time lifestyle writer to the ridiculously rich. The other day an email plopped into my inbox with the subject line “Ten Easy Tricks to Improve Your Posture in 2017.” My heart leapt. I thought, “At last!”

This was news I could use. I have terrible posture. I know this because many people, beginning with my parents and continuing through several grade-school teachers, the family doctor, two Little League coaches, a

professional sadist posing as a high school gym teacher, on up to my first, second, and third girlfriends, have told me I have terrible posture. It’s fair to say there’s a consensus. I once caught my college roommate entertaining some friends with an impression of my stooped and lumbering gait. We were all drunk, but he wasn’t telling me anything I didn’t already know. He moved like Marty Feldman in *Young Frankenstein*.



The most insufferable of those old girlfriends once offered a psychological explanation for my bad posture: A certain kind of tall person deemphasizes his height by drooping his shoulders and bending slightly at the clavicle to keep from standing out in a crowd. Thus, she said, the paradoxical effect of being tall, supposedly a boost to the male ego, is that a certain kind of tall person ends up shuffling around like a Poindexter. You can see why we broke up.

I thought her explanation was baloney until I spent time with Jeb Bush. He is taller than I and hence his posture is worse; although he easily clears 6'3", he always walks as if he’s ducking through the door of Bilbo Baggins’s kitchen. Combine the bad posture with low energy and you’ve got a

failed presidential candidate on your hands. If you want people to think you’re presidential timber, it helps to look like timber.

The Ten Easy Tricks that will de-Bush my posture in 2017 come courtesy of an “exercise physiologist” called Alice Ann Dailey. As I read through them, however, my leaping heart fell.

Tip one: “Walk with knees pointing forward.” I never thought my knees pointed anywhere. Tip two was “Point toes . . . forward.” Where else would they point? I gave it a try while walking my dog, carefully aligning my knees with my toes, in a forward-pointing half-goose step. This had the effect of reducing my walking speed to much less than .01 mph, while causing my legs to stiffen as I walked, and also causing my neighbor to stare at me through his window. Marty Feldman transmutes into Robbie the Robot.

As the tips piled up my body became more entangled with itself. “Carry pelvis with tailbone pointing down toward the heels of your feet.” This made for an unpleasant word picture but I did as I was told. Then I had to point my elbows outward, point my chin downward, and point the back of my ears upward—all while carrying my pelvis. “Supermodels do this,” enthused Alice Ann Dailey, “and so can you!” Robbie the Robot transmutes into Kate Moss. Or not.

I abstracted all these instructions into a geometrical pattern. If I were finally to achieve good posture I would have to envision a theoretical line extending from the back of my ears to my chin, then further downward, sending tangents off to my elbows, intersecting again where my tailbone pointed heelward, down through my forward-pointing knees to my forward-pointing toes.

I tripped over the dog and gave up. It is possible that good posture is simply beyond my ability. I never wanted to be president anyway.

ANDREW FERGUSON

# Barack Obama, Neo-Hawk

It will go down as a classic do-as-I-say-not-as-I-do presidential statement. At a press conference in Berlin on November 17, Barack Obama urged his successor to “stand up” to Vladimir Putin when Russia deviates “from our values and international norms.”

Obama expanded on this thought: “My hope is that he does not simply take a realpolitik approach and suggest that if we just cut some deals with Russia, even if it hurts people, or even if it violates international norms, or even if it leaves smaller countries vulnerable or creates long-term problems in regions like Syria—that we just do whatever is convenient at the time.”

Really.

If President Obama had set out to describe his own policy toward Russia, he could have hardly done better: a “realpolitik approach” in which he cut deals despite Russia’s consistent violations of international norms. Did these policies “hurt people”? Ask Syrian refugees, Georgian democrats, Ukrainian citizens, Russian journalists.

The Obama administration has been even more accommodating behind the scenes. When congressional Republicans and the FBI urged the administration to enforce existing rules restricting travel of Russian “diplomats” inside the United States, the administration, citing concerns about provocation, refused. The “provocation” would have been our enforcing the rules, not the Russians’ violating them (often intelligence officials under diplomatic cover). When the pro-Western Ukrainian government begged the Obama administration for computer equipment and other nonlethal aid that might help thwart the Russian invasion of Crimea, the State Department repeatedly denied those requests and urged Ukraine—the country being overrun—to avoid escalating tensions. Even as the U.S. intelligence community accumulated evidence that Russians were complicit in the atrocities committed in Syria by the regime of Bashar al-Assad, the Obama administration proposed sharing sensitive intelligence with Russians in a “joint integration cell.”

You’ll forgive us if we’re skeptical about Obama’s advice to Trump on Russia. This is the same president whose secretary of state dramatically presented a “reset” button to her Russian counterpart to signal a new era of friendliness. It’s the same president who was caught in 2012 on an open microphone whispering assurances to President Dmitry Medvedev: “After my election I have more flexibility.”

What explains Obama’s newfound hawkishness? His party’s struggle to explain its loss in the 2016 presidential election. A favorite among the various explanations is Rus-

sia’s alleged meddling in the election. This is a serious concern, but it is not being treated seriously either by the leaders now in office or those who will succeed them.

Individuals with extensive ties to Russian intelligence successfully hacked into several entities associated with the Democratic party, including the Democratic National Committee, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, and the personal email of John Podesta, chairman of Hillary Clinton’s campaign. Information collected by those hackers was made public via WikiLeaks, a website with well-known connections to Russian intelligence. A joint statement by the FBI and the director of national intelligence reported that the U.S. intelligence community was “confident” that “the Russian Government directed the recent compromises of e-mails from U.S. persons and institutions, including from U.S. political organizations.” Sources familiar with the intelligence on the hacking tell THE WEEKLY STANDARD that while there’s no question Russians hacked into these systems, the evidence linking Russia to the subsequent distribution of hacked information isn’t quite as definitive. Still, most experts believe that the Russians worked with WikiLeaks to make the information public.

Why did they do it? Was it to disrupt the election? To hurt Hillary Clinton? To help Donald Trump? The short answer is we don’t know. Both Democrats and Republicans have been victims of Russian hacks in the past, but the information made public this year came from Democrats. Hillary Clinton suggested that Putin’s “personal beef” with her led to the hacks but offered no evidence in support of the claim.

What effect did it have? This may well be unanswerable. Prominent Democrats have suggested, again without evidence, that the hack is directly responsible for Trump’s election. Many Republicans have confidently declared that it played no role at all. But there’s little doubt that information from the hacks, provided to the American public in the months and weeks before the election, amplified one of Donald Trump’s main themes: The system is rigged.

President Obama has asked the intelligence community to provide him with a report on the hacking before he leaves office. Republicans are concerned that the report—and the leaks that precede and follow it—will be used to damage Donald Trump as he enters the White House. Given the politicization of intelligence over the last eight years, it’s a legitimate concern. The fact that the leaders of several U.S. intelligence agencies refused last week to brief congressional oversight committee members validates those suspicions.

The president-elect is right to be worried about

Democrats using the controversy in an attempt to delegitimize him. He's right to be concerned about a politicized intelligence community leaking against him. (He would not be unique among presidents in this regard.) And his concern that the mainstream media will report on Russian meddling in a way that casts him in the most unfavorable light is well-founded. But he's wrong to pretend Russian hacking is not a serious problem.

And that's what he's done. In an interview with *Time* in late November, Trump said, of Russia's involvement in the election: "I don't believe they interfered." In the second presidential debate, Trump seemed to suggest there may not have been any hacking at all. "[S]he doesn't know it's the Russians doing the hacking, maybe there is no hacking, but they always blame Russia."

This is silly. There was a hack, and it was the Russians. Claiming otherwise is denying reality. And as we've seen over the last eight years, that's a dangerous quality in a president.

—*Stephen F. Hayes*

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# The Road to Liberty

Last week in this space we sketched the case for a party of liberty. We noted that "one lesson of 2016 is that it's time to worry about liberty again." We asked whether partisans of liberty might be able to come together—"more likely informally than formally"—in its defense. We claimed the answer might be yes.

During the past week, we've heard from two schools of intelligent skeptics who doubt this claim.

The first—call them the populists—base their doubts on the hard political facts of 21st-century democracy. As one former congressman explained on television, voters are not moved by the argument for limited government. When push comes to shove, they want the politicians for whom they've voted to use the power of government to advance their interests.

So a party of liberty would have trouble getting any real purchase in a modern democratic electorate, in which all constituencies are used to imploring government to feel their pain and serve their wishes, and in which voters have grown accustomed to judging politicians by their success in responding to the voters' (often short-term) desires. The democratic pull in our liberal democracy has overwhelmed the "liberal" modifier.

But there are democratic remedies to the diseases inherent in democratic government. Serious thinkers have given quite a bit of thought to this problem, and democratic statesmen have dealt with it. The doubters are correct that

there's no straight and narrow path to preserving and fostering liberty. Liberal democracy is something difficult to achieve, not merely a set of formulas to be defended nor a list of dogmas to be demonstrated.

But making arguments and creating institutions that lead people—often indirectly—to defend liberty surely isn't impossible. Indeed, it has always been one of the core challenges of democratic statesmanship and democratic thought. Tocqueville discusses the ways modern democrats can be led from a concern with their narrow and immediate self-interest to a concern with their self-interest more broadly understood. He even suggests that self-interest well understood can point beyond itself, to a kind of concern for the whole. A Tocquevillian party of liberty may fail. But it is not, we think, doomed to fail.

Which brings us to the second school of skeptics, whom we can call the pessimists. They think liberty itself is a weak oak. Defending liberty is fine, they concede—but the real crisis of our time is the family, or community, or religion, or morality. A party of liberty can't be the solution, because it is liberalism itself that's the root of the problem. It's precisely modern liberty that erodes the social institutions and personal mores, the social and moral capital, that are necessary to the flourishing of a liberal democracy.

This argument is a powerful one. It does mean a simple-minded focus on liberty by itself can't be the solution. But family and religion aren't going to be strengthened in a progressive nanny state or an authoritarian populist one. So figuring out how family and society can flourish, even how they can be rejuvenated, in an atmosphere of liberty is really the only *political* agenda that makes sense for those most concerned about rebuilding social and moral capital.

What all of this means is that it's crucial for the partisans of liberty to have a perspective outside of and deeper than that of modern liberalism. Liberty will only be saved by those who have read—who have studied—its critics, both friendly and hostile. Indeed, one could say that the strength of liberal democracy is intimately related to the strength of liberal education—of an education that looks beyond contemporary prejudices, that is fully open to thinkers and statesmen of the past, that seeks to think through political questions in a way that truly enlightens, rather than bowing to the false gods of contemporary progressive "enlightenment."

But in the end, one comes back to the practical task of defending liberty. How does one strengthen the institutions and mores of liberal democracy? How does one prove both the populists and the pessimists wrong? Not by assertions of libertarian dogmatism or traditionalist moralism. Rather, Tocqueville suggests that the habit of thinking about and acting in one's self-interest truly well understood may be the only way "remaining to us to lead the human race by a long detour back to faith." The road to liberty will undoubtedly require some significant detours. But no great journey has ever been accomplished without detours.

—*William Kristol*

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# An Uncertain Trumpet

The election of Donald Trump initially seemed to be a lifeline to an American military suffering from unrelenting budget cuts—a loss of more than \$250 billion in spending power from the 2009 budget alone—and an equally punishing pace of operations. The morning after the election, *Forbes* magazine confidently predicted the restoration of at least \$500 billion in defense spending.

Not only did Trump promise to make America great again, but in September, he gave a rousing speech outlining a Reagan-like rearmament: a 540,000-soldier active-duty Army, from its current strength of 470,000; a 350-ship Navy, from a current level of 280; hundreds of new tactical aircraft for the Air Force; and a renewed national missile defense network. In a notable deviation from his otherwise expert-free campaign, candidate Trump quoted the blue-ribbon National Defense Panel, a bipartisan group of former senior officers and civilian national security officials, arguing for a return to the last defense budget crafted by Secretary Robert Gates. Trump's credibility was enhanced by the recommendation to eliminate the "sequestration" provision of the 2011 Budget Control Act, which, as he emphasized, disproportionately put the burden of deficit reduction on defense accounts.

Early Trump cabinet moves seemed to confirm the prospects for a military revival. Nominating Sen. Jeff Sessions for attorney general rather than secretary of defense removed one potential obstacle; a budget hawk, Sessions prides himself as a man who "regularly stands guard" to fight government "waste, fraud, and abuse," which he believes is rife in the Pentagon. Retired Marine Corps general James Mattis, whom Trump picked to run the Pentagon, can be expected to be frank in advancing the military's resource requirements.

But the choice of South Carolina congressman Mick Mulvaney to run the Office of Management and Budget sours the apparently rosy scenario. Mulvaney has been among the most dedicated budget-cutters of the 2010 "Freedom Caucus" class of Republicans, willing to make common cause with far-left Democrats such as Barney Frank in offering anti-defense-spending amendments. His particular bêtes noires are the supplemental appropriations, known as "overseas contingency operations" (OCO) funds, that pay for the annual costs of fighting multiple wars. Yet as defense needs have become desperate, even the Obama administration has embraced this backdoor way of financing national security. To Mulvaney, this OCO approach is nothing but a "slush fund," one that "it's past time to do away with."

Trump, too, seems to believe the Pentagon is polluted by

waste, fraud, and abuse, at least if his tweets about the costs of the F-35 or the program to replace Air Force One mean anything. Also, the Trump transition team is said to be a-twitter over a recent *Washington Post* story alleging a "cover-up" of a report recommending management reforms for the Defense Department. The newspaper account was a vaporous blend of inaccuracies and innuendo but reinforced every budget hawk's darkest conspiracy theories. To cite just one example of many, the *Post* insisted the study had been "buried" and removed from the Pentagon website. In fact, it was available from July 2015 to April 2016 through the business board's website and remains available through the Defense Technical Information Center—a simple Google search away.

Trump may have gotten a taste of defense-budget reality in the course of meetings with the chiefs of Boeing and Lockheed Martin, the prime contractors for the two programs targeted in Trump's tweets, and the manager of the F-35 program, Air Force Lt. Gen. Christopher Bogdan. Bogdan has ridden herd on the F-35 effort for several years, earning a reputation for tough negotiating and discipline; one hopes he did the same with Trump. And in his post-meeting statement, the president-elect sounded a more realistic, less bombastic note about the plane's price tag.

Still, Trump has wanted to have it both ways when it comes to new investments and budget reductions. The campaign defense speech fits this pattern: It specified a thoroughgoing defense reinvestment plan but was silent in projecting the cost. And it, too, included a litany of promises for defense reform and government-wide savings to "fully offset" any new defense spending. It was, at best, an uncertain trumpet.

Those in the Pentagon with longer memories have heard this before. In the 2000 presidential campaign, vice presidential candidate Dick Cheney promised the military that "help [was] on the way." But George W. Bush's OMB had other ideas. Budgetary help never arrived, not in the Bush years—when most every additional penny of defense spending went to pay the costs of the wars rather than the modernization or expansion of a force that was too small to begin with—nor of course during Obama's tenure. Instead, Pentagon leaders have taken to dreaming about the distant future, be it under the guise of Donald Rumsfeld's vision of "defense transformation" or Ashton Carter's "third offset."

Yet another bait-and-switch would have severe consequences, not just for the physical well-being of America's armed forces but their psyches as well. Over the past generation, people in uniform have either been fighting for their lives while deployed or "making do with less" when at home station. Few in uniform today have ever experienced a true "build-up" of military power of the Reagan sort; the weaponry of that era may still exist, but the experience is gone.

Eventually, even Charlie Brown gets jaded when Lucy holds the football. He expects her to snatch it away and laugh. It makes for a charming cartoon but is an especially cavalier way to reward a soldier, sailor, airman, or Marine.

—Thomas Donnelly & Gary Schmitt

# Mucking Out the Justice Department

A hard slog ahead for Jeff Sessions.

BY FRED BARNES

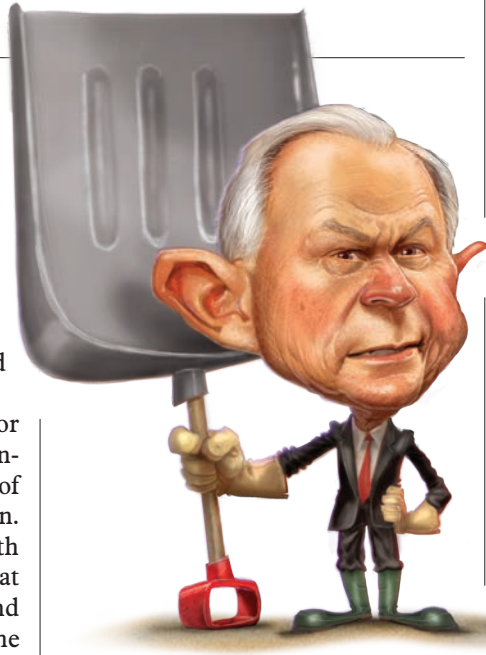
Of Donald Trump's most prominent allies in the presidential campaign, Jeff Sessions is the last one standing. Newt Gingrich is an outside adviser to Trump and occasional critic. Chris Christie works full-time as governor of New Jersey. Rudy Giuliani didn't get the position he wanted—secretary of state—and turned down several he didn't want.

Sessions, as Trump's choice for attorney general, has the job of draining the swamp at the Department of Justice and making DoJ great again. It's going to be a grueling job with many facets. The good news is that Sessions, a former U.S. attorney and Alabama attorney general before he was elected to the Senate in 1996, is familiar with all of them.

Rolling back the excesses of Justice under his predecessors Eric Holder and Loretta Lynch should start immediately. Extreme positions in cases in federal court will need to be changed. One example: defense of the "guidance" letters that propound a radical notion of transgender rights.

The "Ferguson effect" that has weakened law enforcement ever since the August 2014 rioting in the Missouri town should be confronted. President Obama and Holder exacerbated it by putting police officers under a constant threat of federal investigation and second-guessing of their conduct.

Selective enforcement of the law—actually nonenforcement—began early in the Obama administration when Justice declined to prosecute armed members of the New Black



Panthers who had intimidated voters in Philadelphia in the 2008 presidential election. Since then, immigration rules, the Defense of Marriage Act, and the federal requirement to maintain the accuracy of voting rolls have gone unenforced.

And the impression that powerful people are above the law was heightened. Obama played a role by intervening when his friend, Harvard professor Skip Gates, was arrested while struggling to open the front door of his house. Bob Dylan's notion that the ladder of law has no top and no bottom was disproved in the Obama years.

Grassroots conservatives—the non-violent Tea Party patriots—were at the bottom. Justice officials colluded with the IRS against these nonprofit, nonpartisan groups who sought tax-exempt status. They schemed to thwart these groups, even prosecute them, as subpoenaed documents later revealed.

Bankers involved in the economic

collapse in 2008 got kinder treatment. They were "too big to jail." But with the threat of jail hovering in their minds, they agreed to fork over billions in fines. There's a name for this: extortion. The money was often donated to liberal and left-wing groups—in effect, subsidizing them.

As President Reagan's attorney general, Edwin Meese gave a series of speeches in the mid-1980s on the Constitution, its interpretation, and the structure of government. That subject may sound boring, but his talks created what Obama likes to call "a teachable moment." Worried liberals, including Supreme Court Justice William Brennan, chimed in.

A similar moment is summoning Sessions. Speeches on the uses and abuses of federal power could spark a national discussion, focusing in part on Obama's stretching of Washington's authority to the breaking point. Avoiding partisan overtones, while tricky, would be necessary.

And it touches on the role of the attorney general as a leader. Holder concentrated heavily on race and complained that whites were reluctant to join his dialogue. Indeed, they were. They feared being falsely called racist. Lynch was merely weak. Paralyzed by the Hillary Clinton case, she let FBI director James Comey take a public role in deciding whether to prosecute.

Sessions can lead by being independent (relatively), which is what he's been as a senator for two decades. Serious speeches will help. Ordering Comey to be quiet will, too. More than any other cabinet member, the attorney general is obliged to inform the president when he's wrong, as he may often be. Holder, Lynch, and the entire Justice Department failed on that count with Obama.

Now for the hardest part: reforming the civil rights division, the office of legal counsel, and the solicitor general's office. The first two are heavily staffed by left-wing ideologists who have burrowed into civil service jobs. Firing them may not be possible.

As everyone in Washington knows, the civil rights staff has run amok for

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GARY LOCKE

the past eight years. It has elevated “disparate impact” to a high principle that frees the government from having to prove actual racial discrimination. Sessions can flip that to require acts of bias, but he may face a revolt. Or at least a lot of leaks.

It doesn’t get easier. The division led the attack on the Baltimore police force, claiming in a 2016 report that it conducts unlawful stops and uses excessive force. Around that time, three Baltimore officers were acquitted in the Freddie Gray case and charges against three others were dropped. Meanwhile, Vanita Gupta’s authority as acting head of the division expired more than a year and a half ago. Her actions may be challenged in court, creating still another mess.

The office of legal counsel was once DoJ’s crown jewel, known for its integrity and professionalism. Its job was to determine if proposed policies, particularly the president’s, meet constitutional standards. Under Obama, it stamped its approval on anything he wanted to do, including recess appointments when there wasn’t a congressional recess. The Supreme Court struck that down, 9-0.

The solicitor general’s office should never have appealed that case. Its lawyers are top notch and surely knew better. They are an elite crew who decide the position the government will take in federal appeals courts. This gives them an enormous impact on public policy.

Under Obama, they’ve staked out extreme positions. They insisted ministers were subject to employment-discrimination laws, their religious strictures notwithstanding. The solicitor said property owners have no right to challenge a government order to stop building their home. Given such cases, it’s not surprising Obama’s solicitor won only 45 percent of his cases. Over the prior 50 years, solicitor generals prevailed at a 60 percent rate.

Sessions, assuming he’s confirmed, has his work cut out for him. To succeed, he’ll have to be tough, thick-skinned, and at times belligerent. On those traits, Sessions is three for three. ♦

# Electoral Masterpiece

The Founders knew what they were doing.

BY JEFFREY H. ANDERSON

Since November 8, Democrats have been searching for a scapegoat. Hillary Clinton’s defeat couldn’t possibly signal voters’ rejection of the liberal policies that Barack Obama advanced and Clinton vowed to continue, so progressives are on a quest to find the real culprit. They have thus far floated James Comey, Vladimir Putin, “fake news,” and the rampant racism of a citizenry that twice elected a black president. More consequentially, they are taking aim at one of the cornerstones of our republic: the Electoral College.

From the Constitutional Convention’s opening days, delegates debated how the president should be selected. Yet their decision to have that office chosen by electoral vote was one of the last decisions they made. In one enduringly important respect, the system they chose is a departure from a national popular vote. That is the Electoral College’s weighting mechanism, which grants each state a particular say in the overall result. This remains just as good an idea as it was in 1789. Indeed, in nine key ways, the test of time has proven the Electoral College to be an ever better idea than the convention delegates realized:

1. It requires a candidate to have cross-sectional support. The Electoral College makes it hard for a candidate to win who is not supported by large swaths of the country, from sea to shining sea. In this way, it is a nod to—yes—diversity. A presidential candidate cannot easily prevail by dominating just a few heavily populated regions or municipalities. He or she

must appeal to the nation as a whole.

Barack Obama was something of an exception, as he twice won despite losing the vast majority of counties and winning only five states not bordering either coast or the Great Lakes. But Hillary Clinton stretched this parochial strategy to the breaking point. Just 20 years after her husband won almost half of all counties nationwide, Hillary won less than one county for every five won by Donald Trump. One could drive from coast to coast without going through a single Hillary county, while the farthest one could get from the coastal states without going through a Trump county would be from the Pacific to Nevada, or from the Atlantic to Pennsylvania or New Hampshire. Not coincidentally, that’s about as far inland as candidates would regularly venture under a national popular vote, as they would spend most of their time flying back and forth between the I-95 and I-5 corridors.

2. It almost always produces a clear winner. A national popular vote would at times result in razor-thin margins, but the electoral vote has rarely been close. Over the past century, the presidency has been decided by fewer than 100 electoral votes only five times and by fewer than 50 only twice. (It was decided by 77 this year.) The median margin of victory across the past 100 years has been a whopping 277 electoral votes. This has certainly added to the president’s perceived legitimacy.

3. It avoids the specter of a nationwide recount. To this day, no one really knows who won the popular vote between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon—a contest Kennedy nevertheless won by 84 electoral

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votes. (Apart from the dead voters in Cook County, Illinois, it comes down to how the popular vote is counted in Alabama, where people cast their votes for delegates, not candidates.) Imagine if such an election were to require a nationwide recount, with the results of that recount potentially being disputed. Without hyperbole, a constitutional crisis could easily follow. And the more divided the nation gets, the more dire such a scenario would become.

4. It reduces the influence of fraud. With many Democratic-leaning states adamantly refusing to check voters' IDs, or relying almost exclusively on mail-in ballots, a nationwide popular vote would be an open invitation to fraud. Even if more Democratic-leaning states started ID'ing voters, many of them—such as California—give driver's licenses to illegal immigrants, so checking their IDs would largely be pointless. Such states would pad their votes and illegitimately alter the national tally.

5. It reduces the incentive to depart from Election Day. All other things being equal, the longer a state keeps open its polls, the more votes will be cast in that state. A national popular vote would give states a perverse incentive to turn Election Day into Election Week, Fortnight, Month, or even Year—the better to influence the national tally. Meanwhile, states that stick to the time-honored notion of Election Day, a day of civic pride and shared citizenship, would reduce their influence on the election.

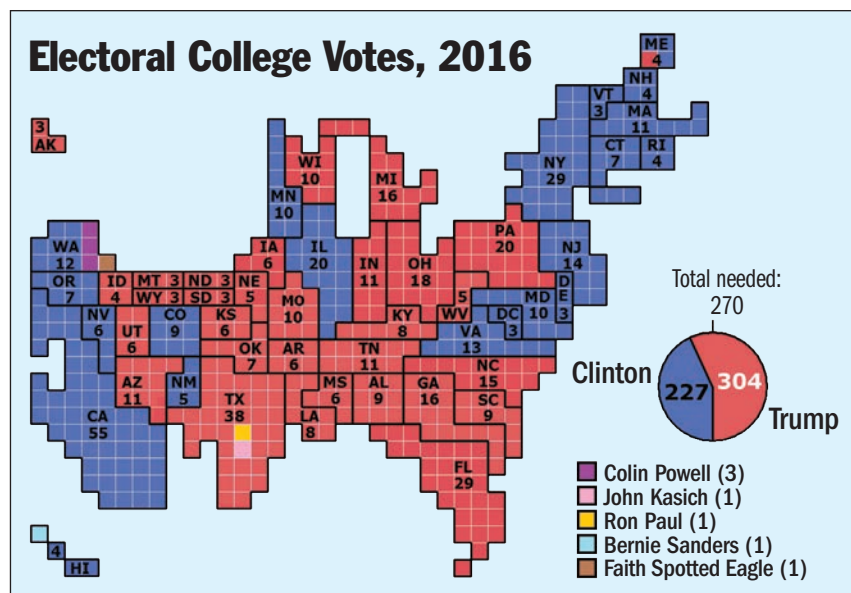
6. It reflects federalism. We are the United States of America, not a nation without state designations or borders. It is altogether appropriate that states should matter in determining who will be president.

7. It is weighted just like Congress. If the Electoral College is illegitimate, then so is the Senate, with its equal-state representation (the only part of the Constitution that the Constitution itself says cannot be amended). When critics of the electoral vote complain about its departure from the supposedly sacrosanct principle of “one person, one vote,” they seem oblivious

to the fact that each state's number of electoral votes is simply equal to its number of representatives (population-based) plus its number of senators (two per state). In other words, representation in Congress “violates” this same principle—and by exactly the same amount as the Electoral College does. Smaller states didn't want to be entirely dominated by larger states in the union they all agreed to form. The same motivation underlies the Electoral College.

which states' representation was originally based on their number of free persons plus three-fifths of all slaves, with the three-fifths clause a holdover from the Articles of Confederation. Is the House, then, “a living symbol of America's original sin”? If it's not—and it's not—then the Electoral College certainly isn't. Moreover, the three-fifths clause has been a dead letter since 1865.

9. It abides by the principle of majority rule. A candidate cannot



8. Its history is not tainted. Showing great ignorance of the Constitution's history and structure, the *New York Times* editorial board recently claimed that the Electoral College

is more than just a vestige of the founding era; it is a living symbol of America's original sin. When slavery was the law of the land, a direct popular vote would have disadvantaged the Southern states, with their large disenfranchised populations. Counting those men and women as three-fifths of a white person, as the Constitution originally did, gave the slave states more electoral votes.

This is rich. Aside from the fact that slavery was never “the law of the land” (but was the law in the South), the Electoral College had nothing to do with that peculiar institution. That fractional calculation pertained to the House of Representatives, in

win the electoral vote with a mere plurality but must obtain a majority. Advocates of a national popular vote want to abandon the principle of majority rule and allow a plurality to prevail. They would like Hillary Clinton (who won 48 percent of the popular vote) to be declared president despite her failing to win a majority of counties, states, or votes.

The Electoral College has not only served us well but is needed more than ever in a country that's increasingly divided. Maybe instead of calling for abandoning this time-honored method of choosing the president, liberals should simply pick better candidates. Hillary Clinton managed to do something no one had done for 140 years: win the popular vote by 2 points yet still fail to win the electoral vote. Her ineptitude is no reason to question the Founders' brilliance. ♦

CHRIS HOUSTON

# The Perils of Hyperbole

A case study in ineffective opposition.

BY JAY COST

With just under a month until Donald Trump's inauguration, many liberals have ratcheted up the hyperbole to the point of derangement. The *New York Times* editorial board has called for the abolition of the Electoral College, dismissing it as nothing more than an artifact of slavery. This came on the heels of a video from Hollywood celebrities pleading with Republican electors to select somebody other than Trump—and arguing that the Founding Fathers, Alexander Hamilton especially, would want them to do precisely that. Keith Olbermann, the former ESPN and MSNBC commentator, has started a webcast for *GQ*, subtly titled “The Resistance,” where he talks darkly about the end of the country

as we know it. Paul Krugman—the Nobel laureate and *New York Times* columnist—tweeted just the other day: “Thought: There was (rightly) a cloud of illegitimacy over Bush, dispelled (wrongly) by 9/11. Creates some interesting incentives for Trump.”

This is quite a *volte-face* for the left. For years, we have been told that conservative opposition to Obama was nakedly opportunistic, even nihilistic, if not outright racist. Now, opposition—distracted, hysterical opposition—is the highest form of patriotism.

Some of this is to be expected. History has shown time and again that

the difference between a loyal opposition and a seditious one is in the eye of the beholder. None other than Hamilton—of late the hero of the progressive left—reluctantly endorsed the Sedition Act of 1798 to quell the opposition press of the Jeffersonian



Anti-Trump protesters in Las Vegas, November 12, 2016

Republicans. The president who signed that vile piece of legislation was John Adams, a coauthor of the Declaration of Independence. In ages past, European kings usually snuffed out their political opponents—literally. Monarchs who failed to mete out such brutality frequently became victims of it. Indeed, during the War of the Roses, England bled itself white because competing branches of the royal house refused to recognize the legitimacy of their familial opponents.

Since 1801, the United States has enjoyed the peaceful transfer of power—but that does not mean it can't be a little ornery. John Adams refused to attend Jefferson's inauguration in 1801, just as his son, John Quincy Adams, refused to attend the

inauguration of his successor, Andrew Jackson. When Rutherford Hayes was inaugurated in 1877, he was quickly dubbed “Rutherfraud” by his opponents, who judged that the Republican party had stolen the vote in several states. More recently, Democrats sputtered with outrage that the Supreme Court had “stolen” the election of 2000, and may have persisted in those bitter declamations had 9/11 not altered the political landscape so abruptly.

So it goes in a democracy. The stakes of elections are so high because elections actually influence public policy. Emotions are intensely felt by partisans on both sides. Feelings are easily bruised, especially when defeat comes as a surprise. That the left has

shifted so swiftly from criticizing Obama's critics to criticizing Trump only goes to show that progressives are not the cool-headed avatars of reason they take themselves to be. They are, much like their current beau idéal Hamilton once wrote, “rather reasoning than reasonable animals for the most part governed by the impulse of passion.” Just as we all are.

Conservatives watching this spectacle are within their rights to enjoy themselves—just a little bit. But

it would be wrong to linger on such petty indulgences. For the good of the country, the left needs to come to its senses. Progressives need to accept the results and move on.

That does not mean they have to submit to Trump and the GOP—far from it. Back in 2009, during the negotiations over the stimulus, President Obama dismissed Republican proposals by saying, “Elections have consequences, and at the end of the day, I won.” He was technically correct, but he missed the bigger point of our system of government. All members of Congress who had been seated in January 2009, Republicans and Democrats, had also won their elections. They all had a right to fight for what they believed was the best course of action,

ETHAN MILLER / GETTY

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and they all did so knowing that there was another election just 21 months away. This was as true in 2009 as it will be in 2017. Trump won—but his victory gives him the right to occupy the executive office for four years, nothing more. Liberals can and should oppose him, just as conservatives opposed Obama. Nothing is ever settled once and for all. The ideological battle endures, as well it should.

But this temper tantrum is counterproductive. The swing voters who decide national elections are too pragmatic to be swayed by such extravagant language about the demise of the republic. They don't want to hear about abolishing the Electoral College. They don't believe that every Trump nominee is a mortal threat to the general welfare. They certainly do not think Trump has an incentive to launch a terrorist attack upon the country. Insisting that Trump is "not my president" is a surefire way to alienate them.

Liberals, if they have any instinct for self-preservation, will need to accept the fact of Trump's election, calm themselves down, and get back to the issues. Trump won the presidency because a critical mass of voters in the industrial Midwest swung to him from Obama. The left needs to figure out how to win these voters back. To that end, they would do well to remember Aesop's "Boy Who Cried Wolf." If they continually harangue voters with jeremiads about how the end is nigh, then their cries of alarm will never be heeded, even if Trump actually does something dangerous.

All of us should hope that the left gets a grip. One-party governments tend toward decadence and corruption, and if the GOP reckons that the Democrats are too perturbed to take back the offices they've lost, it will be less responsive to the general welfare. Our democracy depends on robust party competition—where the combatants compete relentlessly for support on the issues that matter to the public. So, even as we quietly enjoy the collective freakout on the other side of the aisle, let us hope that it ends sooner rather than later. ♦

# Trump Dominates This, Too

The political vocabulary of 2016.

BY DOMINIC GREEN

Politics being one damn thing after another, political language never sleeps. Fortunately, the insomniac hunter of neologisms David K. Barnhart has compiled a lexicon of *au courant* political terms. Should confirmation be needed that Americans are innovative, democratic, and deranged by partisanship, look no further than *Barnhart's Never-finished Political Dictionary of the 21st Century*. Our politics may be ruder than ever, but at least our political language is healthy.

Barnhart's trove can be divided into two categories. The first is descriptive, and most of its message is the medium of technology, lightly seasoned with terrorism. The malfunction of touchscreen voting machines causes *vote flipping*. The prefix *cyber-* is attached to anything with an electric pulse: *attacks*, *jihad*, *polls*, *security*, and *voting*. Reflecting the volatility of the tweet, a gesture of *Twitter diplomacy* may spark a *Twitter revolution*, and a *Twitter offense* can mean both "breaking the law" and an aggressive messaging campaign ("Trump back on Twitter offense").

As ever, long names are reduced into a single word for easy and quick reading. This produces the trio of insurgent acronyms that threaten the peace of Europe, *AQAP*, *ISIS*, and *UKIP*, and compounds like *WikiLeaks* and *uberwealthy*. Some old terms have been revived too. Once more, we *kick the can down the road* (1956), follow the *veepstakes* (1952), laugh sadistically as a

*Dominic Green, a fellow of the Royal Historical Society, teaches politics at Boston College.*

candidate is *unendorsed* (1935), and rue the failure of yet another *pivot* (1920). The venerable *cat out of the bag* (1760) is refreshed as the *cat out of the bag doctrine*, in which officials allude to secrets while denying they are doing so.

The second category is analytical, in the sense that the descriptive *uberwealthy* might lead to the analytical *one percent* (which isn't in Barnhart, but should be). Often, a political moment is named for posterity and framed within political history. The suffix *-gate*, as in *Spitzergate*, *Weinergate*, and *Melania-gate*, has become a marker for any kind of scandal. Although the transgressions of Carlos Danger hardly resemble those of G. Gordon Liddy, *-gate* remains reliable *headline porn*. More seemly analysts may mold a series of policy statements into an ideology, like *Trumpism* or *Clintonism*. Users should note, however, that *Bidenism* is not a coherent ideology. A *Bidenism* is a gaffe. If it reaches critical *Bidenosity*, it can be fixed by *Bidentistry*, the removal of the metaphorical foot from the vice-presidential mouth.

**anchor baby**, {w} a child born in the United States to one or more illegal aliens which enables the parents to stay in the United States. *Standard* (used in informal contexts dealing especially with U.S. politics; frequency?)

About 1 in 15 children in the U.S.—340,000 of the 4.3 million babies born in 2008—has a parent who is an illegal immigrant, a new report says.

Nearly 80 percent of those children are born in the United States, making them citizens, the Pew Hispanic Center said in a study issued Thursday.

The recent political meme of widespread "anchor babies"—children born to immigrants who crossed the border specifically to give their child U.S. citizenship—has led many to call for removing birthright citizenship from the Constitution. Dylan Smith, "Report weighs in on 'anchor baby' debate," *Tucson Sentinel* (Goop

Plato believed that art was *mimetic*, an imitation of a higher reality, so he probably would have understood the concepts of *gesture politics* and the *meta-lie*, a “lie about a lie.” He contrasted *mimesis* with *diegesis*, the kind of fiction that tells instead of shows, and reflects only its own interior life. The analytical vocabulary emerges from a politics of personalities and pollsters’ narratives, of *memes* and *atmospherics*. Its *diegesis* reflects these insidery preoccupations. It does not reflect well that *Aleppo moment* is not a political crisis resulting from a sustained failure of policy, but a momentary lapse of memory before the cameras (after the one by the Libertarian presidential candidate).

For now, the language, like the rest of America, belongs to Donald Trump. Hence the changed meaning of *Trumpistan*. Today, *Trumpistan* denotes *Trumpland*, the *Trumpiverse*, and the *Trumposphere*, where mating pairs of *Trumpanzees* and *Trumpettes* are in a *Trumpy* state of mind. But in October 2001, a *New Yorker* cover showing a

hand-drawn map of the Five Boroughs placed *Trumpistan* on the Upper West Side. Now, with Mr. Trump going to Washington, the Upper West Side is largely *Trumpless*, and a last redoubt of the *Hillaryites* of *Hillaryland*. As to what the *Trumpster* does next, it may not be a *Trumpocalypse*, but there might be *Trumpruption*, and even the occasional *Trumpertantrum*.

Some descriptive shoots are likely to wither after their brief moment in the sun. What, future readers of Barnhart may wonder, made Grover Norquist’s libertarianism so *Norquistian*, and how did Eric Cantor get *Cantored* off a high perch at short notice? Other neologisms are not precise enough. Does the *Buffett Rule* describe a tip for getting value for money from an all-you-can-eat scenario; the hiring practices of Jimmy Buffett’s Cheeseburger in Paradise chain; or the investment strategies of Warren Buffett?

Further problems arise when a metaphor is used in a way that inadvertently evokes its literal meaning, as

when Donald Trump opined that Hillary Clinton got *schlonged* by Barack Obama in the 2008 Democratic primaries. The composites of *Arab Spring* are a sustained disaster of this kind. *Post-Arab Spring* implies a literal Arab Summer. But everyone now knows that the real Arab Spring led to a metaphorical *Arab Winter*. But an Arab Winter, confusingly, would literally have been the season of the metaphorical *pre-Arab Spring*. All of which confirms the suspicion that the very idea of the *Arab Spring* was an unreal conceit to start with.

For a neologism to last, it has to be crisp, instructive, and preferably witty. It has to feel natural, and stay relevant too. *Obamanomics* would read well, but *Obamamania* does not, because the eye sees the *mama* before the *mania*. *Feeling the Bern* is a memorable pun, but *Sandersista* could have three meanings. Is a *Sandersista* someone who shares Bernie’s nostalgia for the Nicaraguan revolution, or an African-American woman who supports Sanders, or perhaps even

## Safe Shopping in Cyberspace

THOMAS J. DONOHUE

PRESIDENT AND CEO  
U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Consumers are expected to have set another record for online shopping this holiday season. A recent survey found that in 2016, for the first time ever, Americans made most of their purchases online—meaning they entrusted more of their personal and financial data to cyber networks, even as high-profile hacking incidents continue to dominate the news.

As online commerce increases, so does the threat of cyberattacks—and so must our efforts to keep our networks secure. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has long embraced the government’s role in strengthening our nation’s cybersecurity, and we stand ready to help the incoming administration and Congress prioritize important strategic measures.

First, our government should build on the proven cybersecurity risk management framework developed by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST). As businesses of all

sizes and sectors adopt the framework, federal agencies must harmonize existing regulations with the NIST framework’s internet security practices. Too often, U.S. companies are hindered by conflicting cybersecurity regulations, which end up shifting businesses’ limited cybersecurity resources to costly compliance mandates.

Second, we need to improve information sharing between public- and private-sector stakeholders. Our adversaries are able to deploy the same attacks over and over again because threats are not discussed between companies and the government. In 2015, Congress took a step in the right direction by enacting the Cybersecurity Information Sharing Act (CISA), which provides legal protections to companies that share cyber threat information. Yet we need continued leadership to promote a cultural shift that will encourage businesses to share threat information.

Third, Washington should work with business leaders to battle cyber criminals. Over the past several years, policy and legislation have tended to

focus almost exclusively on regulating industries. Government can play a more active role in helping stop hacks by fighting cyber-enabled economic espionage, promoting the adoption of international rules of the road in cyberspace, and committing more resources to help law enforcement counter and mitigate threats to our cyber systems.

As Americans continue using the internet for everything from holiday shopping to business networking to sharing their lives with others, the stakes of cyberattacks will rise. We can’t guess who or what will be the target of the next major attack, nor is there any silver bullet that will protect our networks from intrusion. But if our incoming leaders prioritize the right cyber defense policies, we can protect consumers, promote security, and continue to bolster technology’s role in advancing economic growth.



Learn more at  
[uschamber.com/abovethefold](http://uschamber.com/abovethefold).

both? And while *Clintonite* reads easily, the vowel sandwich of *Bernieite* looks wrong to the eye. Only 13 other English words contain “iei.” Of them, only *hogtieg* and *pixieish* are used regularly, through rarely in the same sentence.

The *re-shoring* of manufacturing plants from overseas to the United States sounds reassuring, as does the idea that illegal immigrants will *self-deport*. *Romnesia*, President’s Obama’s term for Mitt Romney’s apparent changes of opinion, is a clever play on *amnesia* and might even evoke the pariah state of Rhodesia. *Scandalabra* both describes multiple, interrelated scandals, and promises to cast light into corners; the word originates in the title of a play by Zelda Fitzgerald. The enthusiasms of the *Tea Party* are mocked with *Teahadi* and *Teavangelicals*. This name-calling is probably the work of *slacktivists* who do not undertake much else apart from *Face-book politics*.

Less elegantly, below the line means below the belt. Just as farmers know that pig slurry is a fecund source of fertilizer, so the talkbacks are a foul but rich source of new political language. The *wingnuts* of the right taunt the *moonbats* of the left. *Dumbocrat* reminds Democrats of their embarrassing *Dixiecrat* (1948) associations. *Blognuts* accuse *Rethuglicans* of *conservative correctness*, and *Rethuglicans* oblige with *libtard*. The mudslinging may change nobody’s mind, but it pleases the slinger. Propaganda, Orwell wrote in “Propaganda and Demotic Speech” (1944), “seems to succeed when it coincides with what people are inclined to do in any case.”

The winner of the rhetorical race to the bottom has to be *cuckervative*, the *alt-right* term for “a moderate political conservative.” Its combination of inventiveness and madness, digital malice and Chaucerian richness, gives us hope for the English language, if not for the people who use it. *Barnhart’s Never-finished Political Dictionary* (available from [lexikhouse.com](http://lexikhouse.com)) is a magnificent piece of lexicographical work, but after reading it I feel nauseated by an excess of *memes*—in fact, positively *memetic*. ♦

# Superheroes and the Sacking of Cities

Even Wonder Woman cannot save the U.N.

BY GEOFFREY NORMAN

**T**he *New York Times* headline says it all: “Assad’s Lesson From Aleppo: Force Works, With Few Consequences.”

There is a sense of disillusionment, retreat, and impotence about these terrible events. In his report for the *Times*, Ben Hubbard quotes Maha Yahya, the director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, saying, “Everybody has been watching helplessly as this conflict unfolds. . . . They are watching civilians being massacred mercilessly and all they can do is tweet about it and sign petitions.”

Cities have been sacked for as long as there have been any around to be leveled. The destruction of Carthage in 149 B.C. may be the sovereign example. The city fell after a three-year siege, destroyed so utterly that, they say, no stone was left upon another, and the land was sown with salt so that nothing could grow where the great city had once stood.

Carthage, of course, was not to be the last. Early in the “enlightened” 20th century, invading Germans leveled towns in Belgium in reprisal for civilian resistance, which they considered an outrage against the laws of civilized warfare. In the Spanish Civil War, they flattened Guernica from the air, strafing civilians fleeing on the roads outside the town.

In the second of the world wars, the bombing of cities became routine. First, Germany bombed London, and the Allies retaliated. In the last months of the war, the Germans were launching ballistic missiles against London, and the Allies

were firebombing Dresden almost to oblivion. Japanese cities were also firebombed, and, of course, two were leveled by atomic bombs.

There was, in Vietnam, the case of the town that had to be destroyed in order to save it. And in Cambodia, Phnom Penh was not destroyed physically by the Khmer Rouge but by the alternative of exiling the city’s population to the countryside for “reeducation,” in fact encompassing the deaths of millions of Cambodians. This amounted to relearning the virtues of manual labor as understood by university-trained Marxists.

And now, in the 21st century and the epoch of globalization, with the whole world witnessing it live and in color on television, we have the fall of Aleppo.

When he was explaining his decision, in 2011, to intervene in Libya, President Obama said, “Some nations may be able to turn a blind eye to atrocities in other countries. The United States of America is different. And as president, I refused to wait for the images of slaughter and mass graves before taking action.”

But Syria and Aleppo, it seems, *are* somehow different even if those “images of slaughter and mass graves” are, in all the essentials, the same. So hopes for a *Pax Americana* now seem forlorn. And then there is the United Nations, which might be the purest symbol of disillusionment and impotence.

The U.N. was created, after World War II, in a spirit of hope. This time, the world would get it right, unlike the League of Nations experiment that followed what President Woodrow Wilson once called the “war to end all wars.”

The league was conceived to be the

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agency to enforce the postwar peace. It didn't work, of course. That the United States did not become a member of the league doomed it to failure, in the conventional wisdom. This was the go-to excuse for the league's failure to act against aggressor states, especially Italy, which waged a war of conquest against Ethiopia in the 1930s and, among other atrocities, employed mustard gas in attacks, from the air, against civilians. If the world could not stand up to Italy—even with the United States on the sidelines—there was not much hope it would do anything to resist more powerful aggressor nations like Japan, Germany, and the Soviet Union.

So the league failed, and the war came. After which came another attempt at organizing the world. This would be the United Nations.

It is difficult, now, to appreciate the magnitude of hope that came with this effort. This time, the world was all in. The Korean War would actually be fought under the flag of the U.N., and if you were optimistic by nature, you could see some good in that. And then there were big personalities who attached themselves to the project in one form or another. Eleanor Roosevelt was the U.N.'s American face in its early days. She made the case for something called the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is an embarrassment now with its guarantees, among other things, to “rest and leisure [and] to participate in the cultural life of the community.”

Still, the U.N. was a serious enterprise, and serious people committed themselves to it. Adlai Stevenson during the Cuban Missile Crisis challenged the Soviet delegate and said he was prepared to “wait until Hell freezes over” for his answer. William F. Buckley Jr., Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Jeane Kirkpatrick all forcefully made the case at the U.N. for freedom around the world. The U.N. was Abe Rosenthal's beat for several years, early in his journalistic career—back when the *New York Times* considered it

worthy of full-time coverage by an up-and-coming reporter. When George H.W. Bush was insisting that Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait “will not stand,” he secured the U.N.'s blessing for the coalition he assembled and took to war. At that moment it appeared that the U.N., for all its by-then-obvious defects, might still have a part in the “new world order” he envisioned.

There were failures, of course—atrocities of the sort the U.N. might

conscience decades later. Halabja, Rwanda, Srebrenica, and, now, Aleppo. . . . To the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran, your forces and proxies are carrying out these crimes. Your barrel bombs and mortars and airstrikes have allowed the militia in Aleppo to encircle tens of thousands of civilians in your ever-tightening noose. It is your noose. Three member states of the U.N. contributing to a noose around civilians. It should shame you. . . . Are you truly incapable of shame? Is there literally nothing that can shame you? Is there no act of barbarism against civilians, no execution of a child that gets under your skin?

The question obviously was rhetorical. The United States is unwilling, and this means that the U.N. is impotent. It turns out that there is either a *Pax Americana* or there is no *Pax* at all.

That does not mean, however, that the U.N. is unwilling to take a stand where it can have an effect.

Back in October, the U.N. named a comic book heroine, Wonder Woman, as a sort of notional “ambassador.” A declaration was issued (and what would the U.N. be without declarations?) saying that the gesture was meant for “women

and girls everywhere, who are wonder women in their own right, and the men and boys who support their struggle for gender equality.” Actresses who have played Wonder Woman on television and in an upcoming film spoke at the U.N. ceremony.

Now the initiative has been discontinued. It seems almost 50,000 people signed a petition asserting, “A large-breasted white woman of impossible proportions, scantily clad in a shimmering, thigh-baring bodysuit with an American flag motif and knee-high boots” is not the appropriate figure for advancing the cause of women and girls in the world.

So bye-bye Ambassador Wonder Woman. It seems the U.N. actually can be counted on to act—and act decisively—in a comic-book crisis.

Just not in Aleppo. ♦



Residents prepare to flee Aleppo, December 16, 2016.

have been conceived to prevent. Most conspicuously, perhaps, in Rwanda, where at least 800,000 died in a few weeks of genocidal fury.

That tragedy was studied by Samantha Power, who is, at present, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. Her book “*A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*” was widely praised by, among others, President Obama. When he appointed her, the expectation was that she would be a forceful advocate for intervention to prevent the kind of horrors she had written about and for which she held the Clinton administration responsible.

Her outrage has not lost its edge. As Aleppo crumbled, she gave a U.N. speech in which she declared,

Aleppo will join the ranks of those events in world history that define modern evil, that stain our

# Hitting Eighty

*Life comes at you fast*

BY JOSEPH EPSTEIN

*Not to be born is best, when all is reckoned,  
But when a man has seen the light of day  
The next best thing by far is to go back  
Where he came from, and as quick as he can.  
Once youth is past, with all its follies,  
Every affliction comes on him,  
Envy, confrontation, conflict, battle, blood,  
And last of all, old age lies in wait to besiege him,  
Humiliated, cantankerous,  
Friendless, sick and weak,  
Worst evil of all.*

—*Oedipus at Colonus*, Sophocles  
(translation by David Grene)

I shall soon be hitting 80. Or perhaps it is more precise to say that 80 will soon be hitting me. Eighty, a stately, an august age, but a preposterous number nonetheless. When I began a job at *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1965, a document from the Personnel—not yet Human Resources—Department informed me that my retirement date would be 2002. The date, 2002, with its ridiculous futurity, caused me to smile. Well, 2002 is long since here and gone. The minutes, the hours, the days, the weeks, the months, even the years pass by at roughly the same pace. It's only the decades that seem to fly by.

Mine has been an immensely fortunate life, though, as Solon warned Croesus, never declare your good fortune until your last breath is drawn. This richest of men, king of Lydia, Croesus lived long enough to see the death of his son, the suicide of his wife, and the fall of his kingdom to the Persians. I have no kingdom to lose, and though I have over the years undergone some of the standard sadness—divorce, early death in the family—I have much for which to be grateful. Still, as Polybius, the Greek historian of Rome, had it: “Fortune is envious of mortal men, and is most apt to display her power at the very point where a man believes that he has been most blessed and successful in life.” This is why I remain a fully paid-up subscriber to the Knock-Wood Insurance Company, from which I carry a

long-term policy. If you're interested in such a policy yourself, contact my agent, Keina Hura.

I drew excellent cards in life, both personal and historical. Personally, I was born to generous, intelligent, and honorable parents, who provided economic security and early gave me the gift of freedom to discover the world on my own. Historically, my generation was too young for the Korean War, too old for the Vietnam war, and lived through a period of continuous economic prosperity in the most interesting country in the world. Ours was a low-population generation—children born toward the end of the Depression—so that colleges and universities wanted us, and we evaded the mad, sad scramble to gain admission to those schools that the world, great ninny that it is, mistakenly takes to be superior.

Ours was also the last generation to grow up eager for adulthood. After us, thanks to the cultural revolution of the late 1960s, staying youthful, forever youthful, was the desideratum; juvenility, not senility, as Tom Wolfe (a member in good standing of our generation) noted, was to be the chief age-related disease of the future. We, though, wanted to grow up, some of us perhaps too quickly. Many of us entered into marriages and had children in our early twenties. Philip Larkin spoke for us when he said that he gave up on Christianity upon learning that, in the afterlife, Christians would return to a childly state. Larkin's own childhood was less than happy; besides, he wanted the accoutrements of adulthood: long-play records, liquor, beautiful women, keys.

My generation grew up with memories of the country's one good war—World War II—hummed the sophisticated music of the Gershwin brothers, Rodgers and Hart, and Cole Porter, and found rock 'n' roll trivial, if not laughable. We learned about charm, our ideal of sophistication, and much else from the movies. We smoked cigarettes, drank Scotch and bourbon, and ordered dry martinis, went to work in suits, a small number of the men among us wore serious hats. We carried handkerchiefs. No one born after 1942, a contemporary of mine declared in a generalization that has held up nicely under my random sampling, carries a handkerchief. In the early 1970s, when I began teaching at a university, after the sixties had brought down the wall of formality, the first decision I faced was whether to teach in tie and jacket or jeans and open-collar shirt. I went for the tie and jacket; it felt more natural. Besides, by my thirties I owned no jeans.

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My generation also had the good fortune to be around for the impressive advantages in technology, not least medical technology, which has led to the prolongation of life. Among these advances, none has been more radical than the advent of the so-called Digital Age, that most mixed of mixed blessings. I have friends, contemporaries, who have decided to take a pass on everything to do with computers, tablets, smartphones—who needs a car, is their reasoning, a horse is good enough—and live, so to say, pre-digally.

I am not among them, yet I remain impressed by the sheer goofiness of much that appears online, which I have seen described as “a vanity press for the demented,” and where the law of contradictions has been banished. One day, googling myself (that new and necessary and slightly obscene-sounding verb when used reflexively), I discovered that I was simultaneously a homophobe and an old poof.

I'll accept the “old” part. One of the dangers of being old—for the moment setting death aside—is that one tends to overvalue the past. Machiavelli, in his *Discourses on Livy*, writes: “Men do always, but not always with reason, commend the past and condemn the present . . . [and] extol the days when they remember their youth to have been spent.” Santayana holds that the reason the old have nothing but foreboding about the future is that they cannot imagine a world that is any good without their being in it. The temptation, when among contemporaries, is to lapse into what I call crank, in which everything in the past turns out to have been superior to anything in the present. Not true, of course, but oddly pleasant to indulge—even though one knows, as Noël Coward, who later in his life himself indulged in crank, had it, “There is no future in the past.”

The detractions of old age are obvious: the lessening capacity for the active life, the weakening of the body, the diminution of sensual pleasure, the irrefutable nearness of death. Toss in memory loss and you get diminishment generally. Cicero, whose own old age was not lived at the Ritz—he was forced into exile and murdered by order of Marcus Antonius, his decapitated head and right hand hung up in the Forum—claimed that “older people who are reasonable, good-tempered, and gracious bear aging well. Those who are mean-spirited and irritable will be unhappy at every stage of their lives.” Yet Schopenhauer, that never-less-than-impressive grouch, held that “we shall do best to think of life as a *desengaño*, as a process of disillusionment: since this is, clearly enough, what everything that happens to us is calculated to produce.”

At 80, I remain, if not I trust entirely illusioned, still amused by the world. I find myself more impressed than ever by the mysteries of life, not least among them unmotivated altruism. In its elusiveness, human nature remains for me endlessly fascinating. No greater spectacle exists than watching it play out at endeavors high and low. I have a friend who reports that, every morning, his 88-year-old mother-in-law wakes and mutters “shit,” cursing because she hadn't died in her sleep. I once read a letter from a man of 71, sent to my physician, saying that he had had enough of life and had decided to forgo chemotherapy for stomach cancer. At 80 I find I haven't had nearly enough of life and each morning upon waking, mutter “Thank you.”

Part of my good fortune has been my health. (“So long as you have your health,” the old Jews used to say—correctly, it turns out.) Several years ago I had heart-bypass surgery, and occasionally my immune system, betraying its name, lets me down. The most recent instance was my contracting a skin-blistering condition called (and best pronounced in a W.C. Fields accent) bullous pemphigoid. Apart from a five-minute stretching exercise in the shower, and the normal walking-about on errands, I do no formal exercise. I have friends my age contemplating triathlons, or who play tennis, singles, for 90-minute stretches. My own greatest athletic accomplishment at 80 is that I can still put on my trousers while standing up. When others speak of staying in shape, I wonder what shape it is precisely they have in mind.

Gradual loss of memory, short- and long-term, is a well-advertised part of the deal in aging. Isaiah Berlin, in a letter to a friend on his forthcoming 80th birthday, wrote: “But 80 is enough—now the decline—the order is one forgets names, then nouns, then everything: gagahood—the end.”

This, however, if my own experience is any guide, is to make things appear more drastic than they are. True, one occasionally walks into a room in one's own apartment and requires a few seconds to remind oneself what it was, again, that brought one there. The title of a movie, the name of the author of a book, the quarterback who succeeded Joe Montana for the San Francisco 49ers elude one, though through the good offices of Google they may be recaptured quickly enough. One of the side benefits of memory loss is that, after a five-or-so-year hiatus, one forgets the plots of most movies and can see them again as if afresh.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAVID CLARK

Still, evidence regularly crops up suggesting my generation is about to hear the Great Publican's call, "Time, gentlemen, time." I go to lunch with a friend who tells me that he has had a pacemaker installed. Another friend is recovering from bypass surgery. An old college roommate informs me that he has been diagnosed with Parkinson's. A boyhood pal has had two unsuccessful spinal surgeries and a prostate operation. We grow old, we grow old, we shall soon wear a lot more than our trousers rolled.

In our twenties, at lunches, my male friends and I talked a fair amount about sports and sex; in our thirties and forties and fifties, food and movies and politics were the main subjects. Since our seventies, health has taken over as topic number one. Sleep is a big item: No one seems to sleep through the night without having to get up two or three or more times. The fortunate ones among us are those who can get back to sleep. The old brutish masculine question of our twenties—"Getting much?"—now refers not to sex but to sleep.

I appear moderately fit, I am neither over- nor underweight, I have a respectable amount of hair (most of it gray) on my head and none whatsoever on my legs. I have not yet developed a walk sufficiently odd to put in for a grant from *Monty Python's* Ministry of Silly Walks. When alone, I find it difficult to think of myself as soon to be 80. I am, I suppose, a youthful 80—an oxymoron if ever I heard one. I don't think of myself as 26, mind you, or 38. If pressed, what I think of myself as is a squishy middling age—57, say. One would prefer to look ageless. The truth is that, on a good day, I might pass for 74.

Still, there it is, that rude number 80. Eighty, it occurs to me, might make one too aged even to qualify as a dirty old man. I was never a Casanova-like seducer, nor claimed to be a champion sack artist, yet it is saddening to consider oneself entirely out of contention in the sexual realm. The knowledge that the beautiful young girl one finds oneself staring at is likely to consider you, sexually, out of the question *does* take the air out of one's fantasies.

On the other, not-yet-palsied hand, near 80 I find (small compensation though it may seem) that I am able to compliment women on their beauty without their feeling that I am hitting on them. "Were I a mere 40 years younger," I found myself saying to a cheerful waitress not long ago, "I should pursue you with all the cunning currently at my disposal." Perhaps she can fantasize about me when I was 40—make that, to be safe, 50—years younger. Perhaps, more important, my dear wife can forgive me for this necessary but awkward paragraph. But then men, as I used regularly to tell my beautiful granddaughter, are brutes.

Within a block of where I live there are two retirement homes, and two blocks in the other direction is Northwestern University. The majority of pedestrians I encounter on

the street are bent over—the elderly on their walkers, the young over their smartphones. The spectacle reminds me of a passage in *Time Regained*, the final volume of Proust's great novel:

Life at such moments seems to us a theatrical pageant in which from one to another we see the baby turn into a youth and the youth into a mature man, who in the next act totters toward the grave.

**E**ighty is not without its pleasures. One is that one sees the trajectory of others' lives and careers—"the trajectory from life to death, with the final vertical plunge not far away," Proust called it in *Time Regained*. One thinks here of those prodigies who came whirring out of the gate but lost ground on the second turn, with nothing left for the home stretch. Or those who were good at school but, as it turned out, nothing else. Or those who made all the predictably correct career and personal moves and yet ended up with supremely boring lives. Or those whose success, given their utter absence of talent and paucity of charm, remind one that the world is not an entirely just place.

Again, I think of my own good luck through life. Going to the University of Chicago, which I did in a blindly stumbling way, turned out to be a crucial step, giving me a primitive but genuine sense of a high culture foreign to my upbringing but which nonetheless seemed worth attempting to attain. I sometimes think I decided on a career as a writer because there was nothing else I could do: I was too squeamish for medicine, insufficiently bright for higher science, too heedless of close detail for law, too easily bored for business.

I was lucky (again) to have come of age when there was still a military draft, which gave me two years between leaving school and having to go out into the world. I began writing in earnest in the Army and published my first bits of journalism while there at the age of 22. In the Army, too, while at dreary Fort Hood in Texas, I put in for the job of clerk typist at a recruiting station either in Little Rock, Arkansas, or Shreveport, Louisiana. I was told by a gruff first sergeant that one of these jobs was mine and that I had a choice, Shreveport or Little Rock. With perhaps a half-second to answer, I blurted out, "Little Rock, Sergeant." In Little Rock, I met and married my first wife, with whom I had my two sons. What, I have often wondered, if I had said "Shreveport, Sergeant"?

After the Army, I moved to New York, where I worked on a now-forgotten political magazine, whose chief benefit was meeting Hilton Kramer, another editor there who, though nine years older and vastly more sophisticated than I, befriended me. Several years later, Hilton put up my name and wrote a strong recommendation on my behalf, as

a candidate for the editorship of the *American Scholar*, the quarterly published by Phi Beta Kappa. Not a member of Phi Beta Kappa, nor ever even a good student, I was sublimely confident I had no chance for the job, even though I was put on the short list of candidates. I saw the interview as an expense-paid day in New York.

All I can remember of the interview itself is that a man on the hiring committee named Edgar Shannon, then president of the University of Virginia, asked me what I would do for young readers if I were made editor of the journal. "Let them grow older," I answered—which must have rung the gong, for I was chosen for the job. I edited the *American Scholar* from my home in Evanston, aided by two splendid sub-editors, Jean Stipicevic and Sandra Costich, in Washington. As I explained to them on numerous occasions, the division of labor here was clear: They did all the work and I took all the credit, which is pretty much how things worked out.

Acquiring the editorship of the *American Scholar* was a lovely bit of luck, but then so was my other job, teaching in the English department at Northwestern. This came about earlier, through the offices of the literary critic Irving Howe, for whose magazine *Dissent* I (then a freelancer) wrote two essays. Howe, an eminence in his day, instructed the head of the English department that there was a fellow in town named Joseph Epstein who someday figured to have a strong reputation as a writer and that he ought to hire him. *Mirabile dictu*, the man did, even though I have no advanced degrees, or ever acquired any. Better yet, my Northwestern job was without tenure—each year, for 30 years, I was asked if I should like to stay on for another year—so that I never had to attend any faculty meetings and listen to the petty squabbles of my colleagues. If the reigning sin of capitalism is greed, and that of socialism is envy, from their conversation I grasped that that of academic life is resentment.

So there I was, with two relatively cushy jobs, both sounding more prestige-laden than they truly were, the two together not requiring anything like my full energy. I am a man who has made a respectable living without having had to go into an office regularly since 1970, and owing to these jobs I am, today, a thing I'd never thought I'd be: a pensioner. To fill in the time, and to evade boredom, I have been able to write and edit 30 or so books. My luck seems to have held out, for thus far I haven't run out of things to write about or editors who agree to publish and, most astonishing of all, pay me for my various scribblings. We are all audodidacts. The only difference is that I, because of a certain small skill acquired over the years at constructing sentences, happen to have conducted my self-education in public.

I should like to say that my current age has mellowed me, made me calmer and wiser, more thoughtful generally. Alas, it is not so. I find myself as easily ticked off as ever at inefficiency, bad manners, what I take to be stupidity in high places. Seeing those I take to be the wrong people vaunted can also tick me off—though no longer to the max, since I have come to understand that this is the way of the world. I do not allow myself to get as worked up about political subjects as formerly, my patience having lengthened a notch or two. If there is any reason behind these modest improvements in self-deportment, it is perhaps to be found in my reminding myself (as if any reminder is required) that I shall before long be departing the planet, and there is no point in spending any of the time remaining to me with a red face. The thought lends me a certain detachment, though nothing, mind you, approaching serenity.



The most difficult thing about aging is time—the obvious fact that one is running out of it. At 80, one is playing well into the fourth quarter, if not in overtime. To change from a basketball to a gambling metaphor, at 80 one is also playing on house money. That, though, doesn't diminish one's greed for more time still. From roughly 60 on, the obituary columns of the *New York Times* have become the first thing I check, partly

to see if anyone I know has pegged out but also to discover how old the newly dead were. A fine morning is when the subjects of the paper's main obituaries are all over 90; a dreary one is when most were still in their 70s, or younger.

Life at 80 is marked by a sense of delimitation. Santayana wrote that whatever one's age, one should always assume that one still has a decade left to live. In one of his letters he noted that, in his early 80s, his physician wanted him to lose 15 pounds, adding that he apparently desired him in perfect health just in time for his death. (He lived to 88.) In his 80s my friend Edward Shils still bought dishes and other new household items: "It gives one a sense of futurity," he explained.

I find the English phrase "This should see me out" more and more coming to mind. I shall probably not, in my lifetime, buy another suit. (A friend in the clothing business tells me that only lawyers buy suits nowadays.) I own two good overcoats. I may have enough shoes to play on through. I have some 40-odd neckties, no fewer than seven scarves, and a single ascot, which I may work up the nerve to wear if I make it to 85. These should see me out.

If one is fortunate enough to make it into one's 90s, the problem, outside health, figures to be friendlessness. I have myself felt the loss of dear friends for at least a decade

now. I happen to have had many friends seven and eight years older than I, and a few much older than that, most of whom are gone. Some among them were also important to me as sources of approval. The good opinion of my writing by Hilton Kramer, John Gross, Dan Jacobson, and Edward Shils—four men notable for their intellectual penetration and lovely sense of humor—meant a great deal to me. Their approval boosted my self-esteem, or as I prefer to think it, my self-Epstein. I know precisely what Sybille Bedford meant when, in her book *Figsaw*, she wrote: “Hope of approval by a handful of elders and betters: yes; aiming at sales, fashion, success: no.” In his letters, Isaiah Berlin begins at 60 to complain that there is no one left for him to look up to. Berlin himself, of course, was a man up to whom a great many younger men looked, and even now, long after his death in 1997, still do. Yet the world seems impoverished without people inhabiting it one admires without qualification.

At 80, I wonder if I have already reached the status of back number. Some years ago Murray Kempton wrote about Arthur J. Goldberg, who, some will recall, was the former attorney for the AFL-CIO, the former secretary of labor under John F. Kennedy, the former Supreme Court justice, the former ambassador to the United Nations. Kempton gave his article the title “The Former Arthur Goldberg.” For some years now, I have begun to sniff something of this same odor of formaldehyde about myself. I have seen myself described as the former editor of the *American Scholar*. I am, officially, a lecturer emeritus at Northwestern, and people no longer address me (wrongly) as Dr. Epstein. When they did, I had to restrain myself from saying, “Read two chapters of Henry James and get right into bed; I’ll be over as soon as I can.”

Five or six years ago, a famous journalist told a friend of mine that that very day was his 80th birthday, but he wasn’t telling anyone. He, the journalist, specialized in the status life and on being with-it in a high-powered way, and 80, by its very nature, carried with it more than a mere suggestion of being out of it. I have no such problem. I rather like the notion of being out of it and am closing in on achieving the blessed state. I know the names of fewer and fewer movie stars and, on the street, could not distinguish Cate Blanchett from Keira Knightley. Once a regular moviegoer, I now almost never go to the movies and am content to wait six months, a year, or longer for the arrival of a promising (of which there seem to be fewer and fewer) movie to come out in DVD. I have scant interest in any movie about people under 40. I have almost arrived at the condition of a friend who, emerging from another disappointing contemporary movie, announced, “I never want to see another movie I haven’t seen before.”

In politics, I seem to have arrived at the same position,

if not the same politics, as the British historian A.J.P. Taylor, who once claimed for himself “extreme views, weakly held.” Most of my views these days are backed up by very few facts. At 80, is one really supposed to take time out to read up on the trade bill, know the name of the Indian minister of defense, or have a clear position on the safe-road amendment currently up before the Illinois legislature? I don’t believe so. My current interest in travel is nil. I shall die content not having seen Khartoum or Patagonia. I’ll be all right without another trip to Europe. “When a man is tired of London,” Samuel Johnson pronounced, “he is tired of life.” But then, Johnson knew London, and England with it, before its leading figures were those two knights of doleful countenance, Sir Elton and Sir Mick.

As for books, I mentioned to someone the other day that I was slowly reading my way through Theodor Mommsen’s majestic four-volume *History of Rome*. “You don’t read any crappy books, do you?” he said. With the grave yawning, I replied, why would I? As a literary man, I used to make an effort to keep up with contemporary novels and poetry, but no longer feel it worth the effort. No more 500- and 600-page novels for me written by guys whose first name is Jonathan. I have given the current batch of English novelists—Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes, Salman Rushdie—a fair enough shot to realize I need read no more of them; their novels never spoke to me, and are less likely than ever to do so now. I glimpse poems in the *New Yorker*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, and in the few literary quarterlies to which I still subscribe; but none stick in the mind, and poor poetry itself has come to seem little more than an intramural sport, restricted in interest largely to those people who continue to write the stuff.

About visual artists, whereas once I would have been ashamed not to know the names Frank Stella, Robert Motherwell, and Fairfield Porter, today I shamelessly acknowledge I cannot name a single working painter or sculptor. About installation and performance artists, don’t even ask. Out of it, nicely, happily out of it.

“There is,” says Sophocles, “no one without suffering; the happy are those who have the least of it.” The reliably cheerful Schopenhauer adds: “No man is happy but strives his whole life long after a supposed happiness which he seldom attains, and even if he does it is only to be disappointed with it; as a rule, however, he finally enters harbor shipwrecked and dismayed.”

Schopenhauer is, of course, correct: Happiness is a fool’s goal; contentment is a more reasonable expectation. Measurements for contentment are not easily established, but the one I prefer is the absence of regrets. Here I count myself fortunate yet again. I have only two regrets in what is now my lengthy life: that I did not study classics and learn Latin and Greek when young, and less serious, that I

do not live in a place where I look out on water. As regrets go, these are trivial stuff—pathetic, really. I am a man who found the right work, married (the second time) the right woman, live in the right place. Such disappointments as I have known I have brought on myself by not working hard enough or being thoughtful enough. A lucky life, mine, touch wood, and may the evil eye not visit me.

For a thoroughly lucky life, one would need to die a painless death not preceded by an illness. Not so easy to arrange. The Greeks, Jacob Burckhardt reports, spent their days “in perpetual contemplation of approaching death.” Socrates’ was the most admirable death history provides: self-imposed in the presence of friends. Seneca talks a big game about death, noting that every journey has its end, that “life itself is slavery if the courage to die be absent,” and insisting that it’s best to remember that you didn’t exist before you were born and you will return to that state when you die.

Yet Seneca, Nero’s tutor and later adviser, and history’s first speechwriter, in the end underwent an enforced and sadly botched suicide, his veins too desiccated to allow the blood from his cut wrists to flow quickly, a death Tacitus describes in crushing detail.

Montaigne was perhaps the most death-minded of all great writers. He deals with the subject in a number of his essays, chief among them “On Fear,” “That We Should Not Be Deemed Happy Until After Our Death,” and “To Philosophize Is to Learn How to Die.” Life, Montaigne felt, must be tried “on the touchstone of this final deed.”

In judging another’s life, I always see how its end was borne: and one of my main concerns for my own is that it be borne well—that is, in a quiet and muted manner.

Wisdom, Montaigne held, ought to teach us not to be afraid of dying. Therefore, it follows that the best way of dealing with death is not to put it out of mind—“what brutish insensitivity can produce so gross a blindness”—but to think almost relentlessly about it, “to educate and train [our souls] for their encounter with that adversary, death.” He himself claimed to have always been besieged by thoughts of death, “even in the most licentious period of my life.” Montaigne wished to die while working on the cabbages in his garden. Instead he died, at 59, an arbitrary and tortured death by quinsy, an abscess that chokes off breathing.

I have never been able to take Montaigne’s advice. While I was never so naïve as to ignore that death was the second main fact—after birth—of life, even now I have not

been able to brood upon it. I have a short attention span—lucky again—that has never allowed me to undergo serious depression or even to linger for long on unpleasant thoughts. Suicide has never entered my mind.

Unlike the woman mentioned earlier who each morning arises to say “shit” because she’s still here, I wake grateful that I am and hope my visit can be extended. I still like it here, still find much to amuse, and a few things yet to charm, me. I understand the longing for death at the close of a long life, especially if the end is accompanied by pain, or even if it is accompanied by disappointment or fatigue. I do not ignore the supreme fact of death, and I can easily imagine a world without my insignificant presence in it. The utter nullity after death, though, I find difficult to grasp. I envy people with strong religious faith, for whom the death question has been put to rest, but have never myself been able, and now don’t expect ever, to find it.

I have few hopes of being remembered beyond the lifespans of my three grandchildren. I have left instructions not to have a memorial after I vacate the premises, having attended too many where the wrong people arrange to speak and, in their remarks, get the recently dead person impressively out of focus. I have left instructions to be cremated, my ashes buried in a plot next to my parents, a simple gravestone, like theirs, setting out my name, birth and death dates.

I have friends in their mid- and late-80s, and even a few in their early 90s, who still find much pleasure in life and bring pleasure to others. With the continued support of the Knock-Wood Insurance Company and modern medicine, I hope to emulate them. I realize that I may be served an eviction notice at any time. I suppose I am as prepared as any normally disorderly fellow can be, though one thing I haven’t taken care of, if my death turns out to be a peaceful one, is the matter of last words. Goethe has already taken “More light.” Beethoven has used up “Applaud, my friends, the comedy is finished.” I prefer something more in the mode of Lope de Vega (1562-1635), the Spanish playwright and poet, who on his deathbed asked his physician if he thought he would make it through the night, and when told he was unlikely to do so, remarked, “Very well, then, Dante’s a bore.” As for myself, thus far the best I have been able to come up with is “I should have ordered the Mongolian beef.”

A perhaps too relentless self-chronicler, I seem to have written essays on turning 50 (“An Older Dude”), 60 (“Will You Still Feed Me?”), 70 (“Kid Turns Seventy”), and now this. If only I can get to 130 or 140—who knows, there just might be a book in it. ♦



# Vaporized

*Russians are reluctant to remember  
the martyrs of the Soviet Union*

BY DOVID MARGOLIN

*Moscow*

**M**oscow is a beautiful metropolis. Even in the cold of winter it is pleasant to stroll around, especially at night, when decorative lights illuminate the city center. Brightly lit streets lead pedestrians past bars and restaurants; a street performer sings strains of Vladimir Vysotsky while strumming a guitar. At Lubyanka Square, just across the circle from the five-star St. Regis Moscow Nikolskaya Hotel, even an edifice so surreally imposing during the day—the former KGB headquarters, now occupied by the renamed FSB—glitters brightly onto the falling snow.



*From left: Dasha, Olga, and Solomon Levenson, circa 1928*

The walk, the atmosphere, it is all so charming that it's easy to forget that over the course of nearly 80 years, hundreds of thousands of innocent citizens were tried and butchered in anonymous basements along this touristy path. Not only in the bowels of the Lubyanka, whose hallways, writes Robert Conquest, smelled of "carbolic and disinfectant," but at hundreds of locations scattered around the city center.

*Dovid Margolin is an associate editor at Chabad.org.*

Lubyanka "is the best known of the NKVD prisons, since it lies within the headquarters of the Police Ministry, and has been the scene of the most famous imprisonments, interrogations, and executions," writes Conquest in his magisterial *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*. "But though its great wedge looming over Dzerzhinsky Square [as Lubyanka Square was known during Soviet times] is only a few minutes' walk from the Kremlin and the general tourist area, it is seldom pointed out to visitors even now."

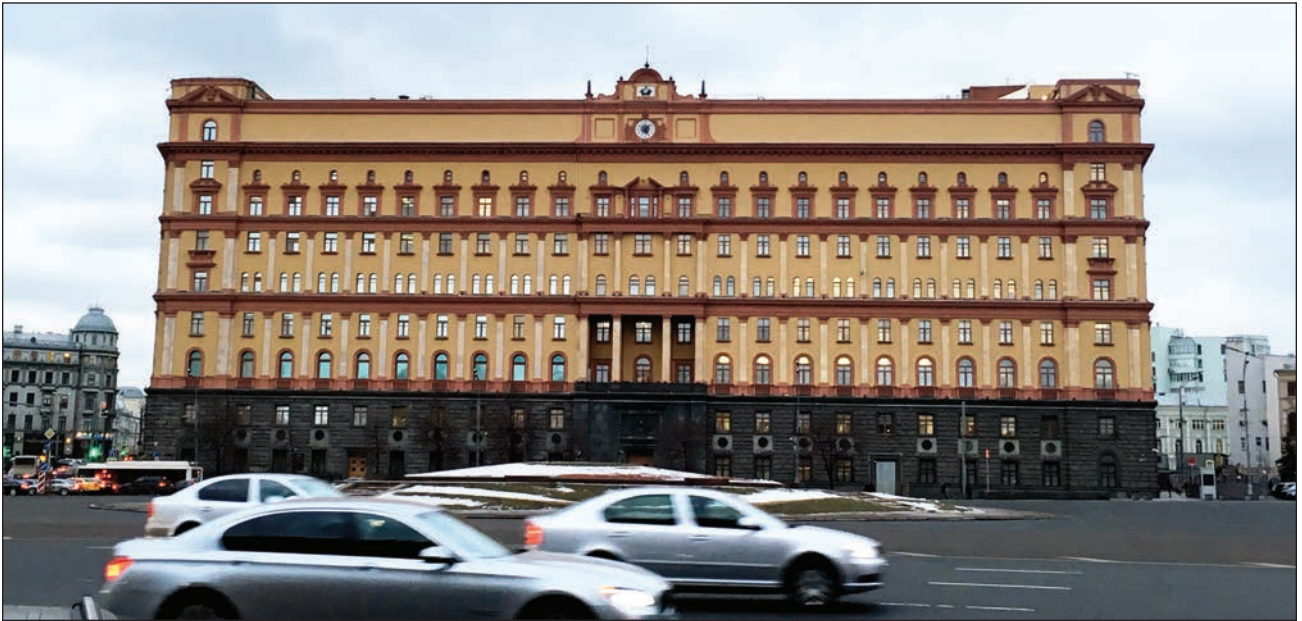
Wander through Moscow today, 26 years after Conquest published his great *Reassessment*, and you will see that not much has changed in this respect. If it is easy to forget the truth about this place, there is no one reminding anybody, either. The grand scope of this lack of historical memory is so jarring that it seems as if it's purposeful, as if someone hopes the smiling chatter of restaurant-goers and boutique-shoppers will forever drown the muffled screams of the dead and the nighttime whimpers of their survivors.

**O**n the night of February 5, 1938, Solomon and Dasha Levenson tucked their two young children into bed in their Moscow apartment and headed off to enjoy the evening at a relative's. Their eldest, a 12-year-old girl named Olga, remembers the date clearly because at the time the Soviet Union was using the revolutionary six-day week calendar, meaning the sixth of every month was the day off, as were the twelfth and eighteenth, no matter on which day of the week they fell.

"Tomorrow is a day-off, we'll go see *The Blue Bird*," Solomon told his daughter before he left. The play, written by Belgian playwright and poet Maurice Maeterlinck, had premiered in 1908 at Konstantin Stanislavski's Moscow Art Theatre. Stanislavski's production of the play was the theater's crown jewel, and it had become a ritual for parents to take their children to see it.

It was after midnight when the couple came home. Three agents of the NKVD (as the KGB was then known) sat in the darkness, waiting. Solomon, a low-ranking bureaucrat in the political department of the People's Commissariat for Water Transport, Narkomvod in Soviet lingo, was placed under arrest. Over the next few hours

COURTESY OF OLGA LEVENSON



*Lubyanka today—‘the scene of the most famous imprisonments, interrogations, and executions’ of the Soviet regime*

the apartment was thoroughly searched. “By dawn,” Conquest notes of the NKVD’s typical arrest process, the victim “would usually have been through the formalities and be in his cell.”

The next morning, Olga awoke early. The apartment—really just a single room in a large communal apartment shared with 22 other families, which they had split into three sections with temporary barriers—had been meticulously cleaned. Dasha lay on the fully made bed in the windowless closet that served as her bedroom, smoking and reading a book. Olga knew something was wrong. Her mother had never smoked, and she found it strange that the entire room should be so made-up first thing in the morning.

“Where’s Papa?” Olga asked her mother.

“He went away on a business trip,” Dasha responded.

“Was he arrested?”

“Yes.”

“I asked that right away,” Olga, my 91-year-old grandmother, told me recently. “It was already in the air.”

Solomon was born in 1897 to a wealthy Jewish merchant family in the Siberian city of Irkutsk. While some of his family members were taken by the revolutionary spirit—in 1906, his Socialist Revolutionary (SR) eldest brother was killed at the age of 18 by czarist police while attempting to rob a bank for the revolution—it seems that if Solomon ever did believe in earnest, by the early 1920s he already recognized the true nature of the project. In 1923 or ’24, shortly after their marriage, a young and enthusiastic Dasha wanted to join the Bolshevik party. Her husband nixed the idea immediately: “One party membership is enough for the both of us,” he told her.

During the arrest, Olga later learned, her father had pointed with his eyes at their family telephone book, filled with names of friends and relatives who were now in imminent danger because of their association with Levenson. Her mother immediately understood and silently tipped it to fall between the wall and the couch. When the NKVD led Solomon out the door, down the long staircase, and into a waiting vehicle, Dasha picked up the cigarettes he had left behind. She smoked for the next 15 years.

Olga’s 8-year-old brother Dima believed the story that Solomon had gone away on a business trip, although he found it strange that his father would have left without taking along his wristwatch. For the next while, Dima wrote letters to his father, asking him to bring back a toy rifle as a gift. When another boy eventually slipped to him that his father had been arrested, Dima began addressing his letters to Comrade Stalin, pleading the case for his father’s innocence.

No reply ever came to the young boy’s letters, nor, for that matter, to any inquiry Dasha made of her husband’s whereabouts. Dasha knew that her own arrest as the wife of an “enemy of the people” could be soon in coming and so bravely packed a small suitcase for herself, which she kept near the door. She also made arrangements for her children to be taken in by relatives if the need arose, knowing the alternative would be a Soviet state orphanage.

Olga remembers how Dasha, now the family’s sole breadwinner and therefore unable to absent herself from work, once sent her to the NKVD information center at Kuznetsky Most 24, to see if she could find out any more information about Solomon. The office was around the

corner from the NKVD's aforementioned headquarters on Lubyanka Square, and Olga took along a book, Victor Hugo's *The Man Who Laughs*, and a piece of paper with the only information the family had received:

Levenson, Solomon Abramovich, 10 years without the right of correspondence.

"That's all we knew, that he had been sentenced to 10 years without the right to communicate with anyone," Olga tells me. "Well, as I certainly know today, 10 years also passes eventually. So I went there to find out more."

The waiting room was not very big and its chairs were all taken by others, also waiting. Olga sat all day reading Hugo, before finally hearing her name called out.

"I walk into the inner office and in front of me is sitting one man, the person I am addressing myself to, and off to the side sat another man reading a newspaper. He didn't even look up," she remembers. "He looks at my paper and says 'Levenson, Solomon Abramovich, 10 years without right of correspondence.' That's it. I told him, 'But that's what I wrote on the paper I gave you! What information is there about him?!?' None. No, we don't have any. Meaning, I sat there the entire day to read my own little paper."

Conquest notes the misery the wives and children of the arrested were put through, the endless waiting at various information centers where, if they learnt anything of their loved one, it was a lie anyway. He quotes the Russian poetess Anna Akhmatova, who wrote in the introduction to her *Requiem* that if a monument ever be erected to her, it should be placed at the gates of the Leningrad prison where she stood for hundreds of hours hoping to glean some little piece of information about her son.

"Years we waited! We thought, 'Oh, here he's going to come back,'" my grandmother says. "We all waited for almost 10 years. My mother was 36 when he was arrested and that was it, her whole life she ended up waiting."

It would be 18 years before the Levensons, Dasha and her children, heard anything more of their husband and father.

By that point they knew. In 1956, a slip of paper arrived at the same apartment from which Solomon had been taken nearly two decades earlier, explaining that he had been wrongly accused and convicted of crimes and was therefore being rehabilitated. In a twisted bit of Soviet bureaucratic morality, Dasha also received two months' back pay for her husband's excused leave of absence.

That was the last information my grandmother ever received about her father from the government. The date

of arrest, burned into her memory, and the date of his Khrushchev-era rehabilitation were all she had. It was not until 2009 that some late-night googling led me to a list of those purged in Moscow published a few years earlier by the Russian human-rights group Memorial. The list filled in a few spare details of the case of Solomon Levenson. He had been charged with being a member of a counterrevolutionary organization. He was tried and sentenced to be shot at the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court on June 20, 1938, and the sentence was carried out that same day. He is buried in a mass grave at Communarka, the former dacha of purged NKVD boss Genrikh Yagoda, and his case file today lies buried in the central archives of the KGB's successor, the Russian Federation's FSB.

Conquest writes that the Military Collegium "had a large staff and was able to mount many cases simultaneously. It took mere minutes even for leading officials or generals. A lesser figure, Eugenia Ginzburg [author of the Gulag memoir *Journey into the Whirlwind*], describes her seven-minute trial before the Collegium in 1937. The Court returned in two minutes with a 'verdict' which she estimates

must have taken twenty minutes to type. Thus the Collegium got through tens of thousands of cases over the years of the Terror. From 1 October 1936 to 30 September 1938, it passed 36,157 sentences—30,514 of death and 5,643 of imprisonment. But these constituted a very small proportion of those condemned."

I discovered the information about my great-grandfather at the end of April 2009. Two months later, my father

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went to synagogue to say Kaddish, the Jewish mourner's prayer traditionally recited on the anniversary of death, for his grandfather. It was the first time anyone had ever said it on the proper date.

Memorial's early Internet lists of Stalin's victims were curiously organized. Generally, one can expect a list of names to read alphabetically, but Memorial's lists were arranged geographically, with victims named by address and apartment number. The address at which my grandmother grew up, number 11 on its street, lists four victims, my great-grandfather in apartment 80, the others in apartments 93, 124, and 137. Go up and down the street and you can see more. Four men from building number 10 were also purged, one from number 13, and another five from number 14.

It's a short walk from Lubyanka Square to my grandmother's childhood home. An old building with high ceilings and big windows, its apartments would fetch a good price today if anyone could figure out how to empty them of their longtime inhabitants. Nobody has, and so the halls and stairways have essentially remained unchanged for decades: peeling brown and tan paint, crumbling tiles, flickering lights.

I hadn't planned on entering the building, but the front doors opened with only a slight tug, so I let myself in. I knocked on what I thought was the correct apartment and explained that my grandmother had once lived here and if it was okay with them, I would love to take a look around. Strictly speaking, Moscow is the last place in the world where strangers allow you into their apartments (Muscovites do not give directions on the street, either, insisting briskly that they have not the slightest knowledge of whatever location you are seeking), but I got lucky. The kind Jewish woman who ended up being on the other side heard me repeat my familiar-sounding name, viewed my Semitic features through the peephole, and, after unlocking multiple chains and deadbolts, finally let me in.

"This is not your grandmother's apartment, though," she told me. "Three generations of my husband's family have lived here, this was never a communal apartment."

The woman was friendly and helpful, pointing out the places where the Soviets had built walls to split apartments and various landmarks my grandmother had mentioned to me. But each time I brought the conversation to the central thought on my mind, Stalin's early-morning arrest of my great-grandfather from the same musty apartment building that I found myself in, she waved it off, preferring to focus on the more pressing issues at hand.

"What Stalin?" she dismissed. "Today we have one czar, we have Putin, that's all. Everyone has already forgotten all the rest of it."

I mentioned to her that it seemed to me that Russia had never made a proper reckoning of its past. "Of course. That's because we all, probably, were caught up in this," she answered. "I hate the subject. I don't even like to think about it."

As I walked out into the hallway to leave, she advised me not to bother trying my grandmother's actual apart-



*Above, the building where the Levenson family lived in 1938, sharing apartment 80; below, the tarp-covered Military Collegium Shooting House, where thousands of summary trials were held.*



ment, elsewhere in the building. After Dasha moved out of the place in the 1960s, the entire communal apartment—the pre-revolution home of a wealthy doctor—was emptied of its tenants and given to a high-ranking official. Now his children lived there and, she said, they were off their rockers. "There's no point in even knocking. They won't open the door."

Just as sites associated with Soviet crimes are popularly ignored and unmarked, it is nearly impossible to fish information and case files out of Russia's FSB archives. This shutdown in access can be traced to the

aftermath of former KGB officer Vladimir Putin's first election as president in 2000. It wasn't always like that. In the early post-Soviet days, the doors of the Lubyanka were flung open, as people rushed in to seek for themselves definitive information about their loved ones. While this openness allowed millions of people to discover the true fates of family members and finally learn historical truths their government had always lied to them about, it also turned the archives into total disarray—similar to other aspects of the country during that wild decade.

"It was all open, so you could do whatever you wanted," explains Rabbi Boruch Gorin, a key adviser to Russia's chief rabbi Berel Lazar and the editor of the *Lechaim* Jewish literary magazine. "That was very useful, but there was also great harm done because a huge amount of files were straight-out stolen. It could be as a souvenir, or it could be something that compromised them."

In a land where millions of people were repressed, millions more had to do the repressing. There are many decent people who are embarrassed and remorseful over actions they or their families took during the Soviet era. There are also people who may not regret what they did but do not want it known publicly, either. Gorin, who is also the chairman of Moscow's recently opened \$50 million Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, says the archives are not completely sealed and a limited number of academics and historians have access to them, actively writing on Soviet crimes.

"Their thought is that when nonexperts begin to study this information and can access any files, it can lead to a lot of things—blackmail, suicide—as was the case in Germany," says Gorin. "Many people don't understand that if a KGB file contains a statement showing one person was an informant, it doesn't necessarily mean that he actually was, and so on."

The fact remains that it is extremely difficult to access archives, and there is a very obvious disdain for reminders of past crimes. Along with this comes a far more sinister

development: In Russia, Stalin has reemerged as a leader to admire. According to polls conducted by the Levada Center, a majority believes Stalin had a positive effect on Russian history, and he has come out among the top three Russian leaders of the twentieth century. Growing admiration of Stalin is a stark reminder that no Communist party officials or KGB bosses

were ever held accountable for their crimes. Gorin says that this is more than just a problem of history.

"Here there is an absolutely tolerant approach to the past. Bluntly stated, if you don't go through the process of de-Nazification, then new Nazis appear," says Gorin. "That today you have people in Russia who believe that if you don't share their beliefs then you ought to be thrown in prison is because the people who did that in the previous regime were never held responsible."

Of course, the creation of a grand and continuous arc of Russian history is a pillar of Putin's ideology, turning expressions of strength and power into reflections of the country's purported natural destiny. If that is the case, then crimes committed in the process do not hold much significance. In fact, acknowledging them will be seen as an affront.

"Everything breaks down into those who love Russia and those who don't," Gorin says, explaining the reasoning of "right-thinking" Russians. "Stalin loved Russia. How do we know? It was big and powerful, everyone was afraid of it. What of the millions he shot? That

doesn't matter. You are blackening our history."

If Putin has appropriated Russia's past achievements while shirking responsibility for its darker underbelly, the opposite extreme also exists: Members of the liberal opposition in Russia have rhetorically lifted Putin's alleged crimes to the level of Stalin's.

To say that Putin is today's Stalin is simply not true, asserts Gorin. "Where are the Gulags? Where are the thousands of arrests? There is, after all, a difference between propaganda and Gulags. To say that contemporary Russia is like Stalinist Russia is to say, exactly as the government does, that Stalin's Russia wasn't all that bad."



Olga Levenson in 2016

**The KGB information center where my grandmother and thousands of others sat waiting was knocked down in 1982, the old buildings making way for a massive KGB annex, still occupied by the FSB today. There is no plaque or marker for the millions of combined hours spent there by parents, spouses, siblings, and children.**

In 1927, the religious leader of Soviet Jewry, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, was arrested in Lenin-grad for his leading role in sustaining Jewish life after the revolution. Schneersohn, the then-Lubavitcher rebbe, writes of the nighttime executions he heard at the Spalerno prison: the screams followed by gunshots followed by the heavy silence of death.

“Who knows if at that very moment, as these individuals are being taken to be slain, shrieking and pleading, at the very same time, their wives, sons and parents are in deep slumber with visions of hope, unknowing that this very instant their husbands, fathers, or sons are being led to slaughter?” he records in his memoirs, translated into English as *The Heroic Struggle*. “How tragically unfortunate is the man who in his last moments is denied the opportunity to express his last requests to his survivors—to have a last glance of those dear to him, his beloved and his friends, to bless his children.”

No marker has ever been affixed to the Lubyanka or Spalerno or any other Soviet prison where millions of men and women were forever silenced.

The KGB information center where my grandmother and thousands of others sat waiting was knocked down in 1982, the old buildings making way for a massive KGB annex, still occupied by the FSB today. There is no plaque or marker for the millions of combined hours spent there by parents, spouses, siblings, and children.

But it is the central and almost shrouded location of the Military Collegium, where so many were tried and executed, that is most shocking. Covered by a massive tarp since the early 2000s, the building that housed the collegium stands at Nikolskaya 23, just down the road from the St. Regis on the street formerly known as 25th of October. During Soviet times not many people knew what was taking place in that building, although the NKVD had a small information center there, too.

Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky was tried there. So were the great Russian-Jewish writer Isaac Babel and the

Hasidic chief rabbi of Moscow Shmarya Leib Medalia. And my great-grandfather.

“I passed that building countless times, I didn’t know anything about it,” my grandmother says. “We all thought everything happened in the Lubyanka and that was it.”

Constructed during czarist times on foundations built centuries earlier, the building has thick walls. It is not known exactly how many people were executed in the building’s basement, but with such a heavy caseload, there is no doubt there were many. It is said that so heavy was the smell of blood during those dark years that horses startled as they passed by. Today the building is known as Dom Rasstrelny, the Shooting House, and is stuck in limbo between a private developer and advocates for memorialization of the crimes that happened there. Moscow’s Gulag Museum sets up a photo exhibition every year on the street outside of it and protesters gather there from time to time, yet the building remains covered as if under construction, not even a hint of its awful nature visible to passersby. According to Gulag Museum officials I spoke with, hopes for the building’s future memorialization are dim.

Today, Olga Levenson is a full-fledged, voting American (and WEEKLY STANDARD reader) who has lived happily in Boston for the last 31 years. While she heartily throws back shots of vodka (as we did together during our interview), she does not miss Moscow or Russia even a shred. But on a dresser in her room, next to pictures of her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, sits a

black-and-white photo of her father, his penetrating eyes looking out from under a peaked hat of the party.

“I tell you, my whole life has gone by, 79 years, but if I’m dusting the top of the dresser, or if I just look at the picture, my heart tears,” she tells me. “It’s not just like a symbolic figure sitting there, he’s a familiar person to me. How many years have gone by that I haven’t seen him, but to this day I feel a pain. I always remember him.”

Unlike those who arrested and killed Solomon Levenson—and so many of his countrymen and women. ♦



*Above, an official portrait of Solomon Levenson in party uniform; below, a dun statue of Karl Marx looms among festive lights in the Moscow dusk.*



ABOVE, COURTESY OF OLGA LEVENSON



*The Takács Quartet, including Edward Dusinberre, first violin (left)*

# All Together Now

*Breaking the ice with Ludwig van Beethoven.* BY GINA DALFONZO

**F**orgive me when you see me draw back when I would gladly mingle with you,” wrote Ludwig van Beethoven in the Heiligenstadt Testament, a letter he addressed to his brothers (and humankind in general) in 1802, but never sent. “My misfortune [deafness] is doubly painful because it must lead to my being misunderstood, for me there can be no recreations in society of my fellows, refined intercourse, mutual exchange of thought, only just as little as the greatest needs command may I mix with society.”

The Heiligenstadt Testament is a

*Gina Dalfonzo is the editor of BreakPoint.org and Dickensblog.*

**Beethoven for a Later Age**  
*Living with the String Quartets*  
by Edward Dusinberre  
Chicago, 232 pp., \$30

well-known document and has been exhaustively studied as one of the clearest windows we have into the composer’s thinking. And yet, Beethoven’s description of himself as a man who wanted “the society of [his] fellows” generally plays little part in the popular conception of him. On the contrary, we tend to remember him as deliberately, fiercely individualistic—an icon for those who prefer to go their own way, unconcernedly leaving the rest

of humanity trailing in their wake. In fairness, Beethoven himself contributed considerably to his own reputation with his distinct lack of social graces, including a notorious carelessness about hygiene and a manner that could be abrupt to the point of rudeness. This helps to explain why posterity has tended to gloss over, or even ignore, his expressed longing for companionship. Yet Edward Dusinberre suggests that we shouldn’t, and he brings to the subject the perspective of a musician who has spent his life playing in one of the world’s great string quartets, the Takács. He takes his title from Beethoven’s rejoinder to critics who found his Opus 59 quartets too radical: “They are not for you, but for a later age!”

ROBERT TORRES

That might seem to go well with the portrait of Beethoven as an isolated genius against the world. Nonetheless, that's not the Beethoven that Dusinberre hears after having worked for so many years on his quartets—arguably one of the most social forms of music.

To be part of a quartet, Dusinberre explains, requires not just great musicianship but also an ability to play well with others, both onstage and off. He learned this very early in his career. Dusinberre was a reserved young Englishman just out of Juilliard when he got the chance to audition for the recently vacated position of first violin of the Takács Quartet. Suddenly, he found himself in the middle of a gregarious group, prone to lapsing into their native Hungarian and able to read each other's signals during rehearsals and performances with a quickness that caught him off guard. As a candidate for first violinist, he was supposed to be displaying leadership skills at a time when he was still struggling not to feel like an outsider.

During that strenuous audition period, he found himself grateful for the particular Beethoven piece they were working on (Opus 59, No. 3):

The vivid emotional landscape and exhilarating conclusion of Beethoven's defiant response to personal suffering proved to be stalwart companions both for the seasoned members of the Takács and their inexperienced applicant.

Throughout his book, tracing Beethoven's history and experience with string quartets along with his own, Dusinberre continues to find him an inspiring, if unconventional, guide—both to music and to life with other musicians. The tensions and stresses of the composer's personal relationships drove him to create music that offered something more idealistic: "Grieving the loss of companionship, Beethoven created his own ideal dialogues in his Opus 18 quartets, conversations over which he had complete control."

If that statement can be read cynically, it's still not altogether condemnatory. For as much as he might have liked to, Beethoven wasn't able to

exercise complete control over others in real life. In order to have this idealistic music realized, Beethoven had to work with real musicians, with all the difficulties and struggles that entails—and that Dusinberre would come to understand. Recalling one recording session, he writes:

I was reminded of the laconic observation by another quartet player that the hardest aspect . . . was the constant need to respect one's colleagues' opinions. At times I just wanted to forge ahead with my own idea, impatient with the complexities inherent in working so closely with three other musicians.



Beethoven by W.J. Mähler

But there's little room in quartet playing for forging ahead. In rehearsals, in performances, and even over meals, the four musicians were constantly rethinking and reworking their phrasing, emphasis, timing, and the myriad other details that go into making great music. The whole exercise requires a sense of humor, an ability to compromise and cooperate, and a healthy amount of humility, all of which Dusinberre displays here.

He quotes Goethe's description of a string quartet as "four rational people conversing with each other," and even if the Takács often looked more like three excited Hungarians and an impatient Englishman wrangling

with each other across a breakfast table, that was the standard for which they strove. Over the years, through the harmonious moments and the dissonant ones—and as various members dropped out because of illness or other career opportunities, and had to be replaced—the remaining members have grown closer, chiefly through the deliberate practice of "emotional restraint."

"Unlike in some kinds of reality show," Dusinberre quips, "the aim is to keep four people on the island."

Dusinberre uses the two different endings of Beethoven's Opus 130 as an analogy for their relationships—the original, turbulent *Grosse Fuge* movement, in which "the voices cry out against their interdependence," and the more peaceful and conventional movement with which Beethoven reluctantly replaced it. The Takács has played both versions of the work, and is very familiar with both moods: "Every now and again we experience a *Grosse Fuge* of sparky interactions that while leaving us briefly raw and vulnerable allow a return to the daily cheer of the alternative finale," he recounts. "Keeping the peace is something I value now much more than I did 20 years ago."

Yet even as he celebrates this personal and professional achievement, Dusinberre wryly imagines the composer's reaction:

All the more reason for Beethoven to deride me! What business do I have censoring his works for my own needs? The fugue demands to be played, like so much of Beethoven's great music not merely affirming but challenging a life view or emotional state, not allowing one to stand still.

He may be right about that. But it may also be that Beethoven, after a lifetime of strained and difficult relationships, would have understood the need for a little peace. If interpersonal harmony was something he struggled for, this wise and perceptive book suggests, at least his sublime quartets hint to us that he knew it was worth the struggle. ♦

# Orders of Merit

What did John Adams see when he looked to the future? BY JAY COST

**T**hough civic education among the public has sunk to embarrassing levels, there has of late been an explosion in scholarship on the Founding Fathers. The intellectual giants of the revolutionary era are again all the rage among literary types, academic and otherwise.

Thomas Jefferson—the American sphinx, as Joseph Ellis calls him—is hardly *en vogue* these days, but his role in the founding is so extraordinary that antipathetic scholars cannot help but reckon with him. James Madison, Jefferson’s political lieutenant but hardly his intellectual subordinate, has enjoyed a renaissance in our times, as his description of relentless factional conflict seems to capture the essence of contemporary interest-group politics. Alexander Hamilton, long castigated as the defender of economic privilege, is enjoying a current bipartisan respectability. Conservatives have long admired his visionary understanding of how “trickle-down economics” can generate prosperity for all; liberals—increasingly animated by identity politics—have a newfound appreciation for this possibly mixed-race immigrant from the Caribbean.

Even George Washington, the laconic and inscrutable Father, has been the subject of a probing biography by Ron Chernow, as well as a smaller but insightful text on his political philosophy by Jeffry Morrison. Yet John Adams, true to form, has resisted this popular revival. Granted, he was the subject of a biography by David McCullough, as well as an HBO miniseries. Even so, Adams remains

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## John Adams and the Fear of American Oligarchy

by Luke Mayville  
Princeton, 232 pp., \$29.95

mostly a curiosity—a man out of step with his times and apart from the burgeoning conversation in the present day. Gordon S. Wood’s characterization remains the dominant conclusion: While nobody was more integral to the American Revolution, Adams “missed the intellectual significance” of the Constitution altogether.

But maybe it is we who have missed the intellectual significance of Adams. That is one of the underlying premises of this engaging new work by Luke Mayville. Writing in a conversational and eminently readable style, Mayville teases from the writings of this obstreperous Founder a bracing challenge to republican government, one that is particularly relevant in the age of Donald Trump.

Really, John Adams has nobody to blame but himself for his centuries-long castigation. He was not a man to swim with the currents but, rather, to paddle defiantly against them. His two main political tracts—*Defence of the Constitutions of the Government of the United States of America* and *Discourses on Davila*—amount to a defense of the British system of mixed government, with distinct roles for an executive, the aristocracy, and the people. Hamilton had endorsed such a system as well, but he had the political sense to pronounce his support behind closed doors, at the Constitutional Convention. Adams published his works anonymously, but most learned readers in America quickly divined their

authorship. So his reputation as an elitist was set, as Gordon Wood attests.

Luke Mayville, however, begs to differ, and offers a compelling case for reconsideration. Why did Adams go against contemporaries who called for all power to be organized along democratic lines? Mayville answers that Adams feared the overweening power of the elite. Our second president rejected the contemporary view that it was possible to distinguish between a natural aristocracy (based on merit) and an artificial one (based on social distinctions). Instead, he believed, power will eventually flow to the wealthy and wellborn, regardless of whether they hold titles of nobility. They will form a “natural” *oligarchy* that will perpetually threaten the principles of republican government.

Accordingly, Adams sought to create a system that countered the aristocrats by way of a democratically elected branch and a strong executive, which he thought would align against the grasping oligarchs. Adams’s goal, according to Mayville, was to ostracize the oligarchs, concentrating them in one branch so that their influence could not pervade the entire structure of the government.

Writing to George Washington in the spring of 1787, James Madison argued that “the great desideratum which has not yet been found for Republican Governments, seems to be some disinterested & dispassionate umpire in disputes between different passions & interests in the State.” This is the monumental task that absorbed all the great philosopher-statesmen of the age. Madison proffered a unique answer to this puzzle, as did Hamilton. And the two of them, working together in the *Federalist* essays, ably defended the compromise put forward by the Constitutional Convention. Jefferson, in his peripatetic way, developed an answer over the course of his lengthy career. But what Mayville demonstrates here is that writing contemporaneously on the other side of the Atlantic while serving as minister to Great Britain, John Adams was trying to solve this “great desideratum” as well.

His solution was strongly influenced by the social psychology of the Scottish Enlightenment. Oligarchs are able to corral political authority without formal titles of nobility, Adams reckoned, because people are drawn naturally to power and wealth. As Mayville puts it: “It was not just the ability of the rich to buy influence, but also the sentiments of sympathy and admiration for the rich among the people that tended to concentrate influence in the hands of the wealthy.” One need look no further than the magazines in the grocery checkout aisle for confirmation that people are drawn to the rich and well-born, like moths to a flame.

So Gordon Wood, in Luke Mayville’s estimation, has it backwards: Adams did not misunderstand the intellectual significance of the Constitution, which did away with the sort of balance that was the cornerstone of the British system; he understood this innovation precisely. He simply disagreed with it, and had compelling reasons for doing so.

The reader is left wondering if republican government is actually possible, at least under the premises Adams lays out. If the people are eager to be bewitched by the opulence of a Trump, or the good birth of a Kennedy, what possible artifice can keep them from ceding their God-given authority to their so-called betters? Adams’s solution could be just as dangerous as the disease: By concentrating the oligarchs in a single branch, he may be giving them an opportunity to coordinate their endeavors against the people. Similarly, Mayville notes that Adams wanted to attach honorific titles to government offices as a bulwark against oligarchy. But what happens if the oligarchs acquire them for themselves and their heirs?

While Mayville is sympathetic to Adams’s argument about the counter-oligarchic utility of titles, he does not offer a full evaluation of Adams’s plan of government. But then again, that is not his intended purpose: He seeks, rather, to reintroduce Americans to a long-neglected Founder who has been unfairly cast out of the republican tradi-

tion. In this regard he succeeds: Adams was a republican—and a thoughtful, forceful, and formidable one at that. And while Adams’s solution to the “great desideratum” of republican governance never gained traction, his diag-

nosis of the problem is clear-eyed and probing. Just a few weeks away from Donald Trump’s inauguration, it may be time to reflect on John Adams’s warnings about the danger of oligarchy to republican governance. ♦

BCA

# Enigma Machine

*The birth, and afterlife, of a modern classic.*

BY WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Remember Existentialism? I heard about it, first, back in the early 1950s on a boat full of students bound for Europe. Among the many planned daily activities was a discussion about this exciting new way of thinking. It seemed to involve, centrally, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus (always in that order), and if you wanted a phrase to sum it up, “Existence precedes essence” was available—as was, with reference to Sartre’s *No Exit*, “Hell is other people.”

Sartre was more talked about than read: His philosophical masterwork *Being and Nothingness* was just too long. But Camus was perfect for reading, his short novel *The Stranger* and his essay “The Myth of Sisyphus” each coming in at less than 200 pages. He was, at any rate, a better incitement to deep thought than Aristotle’s *De Anima* or the *Prior Analytics*. But as a budding philosophy major, I was directed in college to Aristotle rather than Existentialism and managed not to read Camus’s novel for many years, perhaps in part because I was wary of the hype generated by its extraordinary success.

Now, to tell the story of that success, we have a first-rate account by Alice Kaplan, a professor of French, rich with the intriguing details of how it all hap-

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## Looking for The Stranger

*Albert Camus and the Life of a Literary Classic*  
by Alice Kaplan  
Chicago, 288 pp., \$26

pened. Professor Kaplan is best known for an engaging memoir, *French Lessons*, and her writing is notable for its unpretentious clarity and vigorous life. Her claim is that no one yet “has told the story of exactly how Camus created this singular book,” and to tell that story, she has brought to bear extensive research, travel, and a careful presentation of both Algeria and France during World War II (*The Stranger* was published in 1942). She distinguishes her voice from the “omniscient” one of standard literary criticism; rather, she aspires to employ a “close third-person narrative,” as if she were looking over Camus’s shoulder and telling the story from his point of view.

*The Stranger* was preceded by an unpublished novel Camus wrote in the late 1930s, *A Happy Death*. Its protagonist, Patrice Mersault, murders a rich man, makes it look like suicide, takes his money and travels about Europe, marries, longs for a meditative, solitary life—and in an “unprepared and hurried ending” (Kaplan’s words) dies of tuberculosis, a happy man. The fledgling novel was full of Mersault’s thoughts about life, sex, beauty, and was provoked in part by Camus’s own travels in Europe, along with

other events. The result was an over-freighted creation that tried to say too much too fully. Camus sent the novel to his old teacher, Jean Grenier, who criticized it. Full of uncertainty, but still full of purpose, Camus began to write the novel that would eventually become *The Stranger*.

Declarations from Camus's notebooks from the time testify to the new principles he was developing for his fiction, such as "The true work of art is the one that says the least," or "To write one must fall slightly short of the expression (rather than beyond it). No chit chat." Rather than attempting, as he had done in *A Happy Death*, to make his hero appealing, he leaves him on his own, as it were, depriving him even of a first name while adding a "u" to his surname, Meursault.

Looking over Camus's shoulder, Kaplan fills in the scene: "As Camus worked in the silence of the hotel room, he could hear as well as see his story." By staying with Meursault's registering of things in the physical world—the sawhorses that hold up his dead mother's casket, the yelling at his dog by the old man Salamano, and in the murder scene on the beach, the Arab's knife glistening in the sun—the result was, as Kaplan sums up, "the beauty of a narrator with no interior life: the external world [taking] the place of ruminations, analyses, feelings."

The claim Kaplan makes for the revolutionary nature of the novel that finally emerged is a large one: that it changed the history of modern literature. By giving the genre of the novel a "blood transfusion," Camus turned its form outwards, "simplifying its expression and deepening its purpose." Kaplan doesn't mention Virginia Woolf, whose posthumous novel had just appeared, and who did more than any modern except Marcel Proust or James Joyce to turn the novel inwards, toward the richness and multifariousness of the inner life. Could Camus, with those writers preceding him, have "deepened" the novel's

purpose by writing shorter sentences and eschewing psychological texture? Kaplan doesn't explore this question, intent as she is on conveying the excitement legions of readers felt at a new technique of fiction.

The most perceptive review of the book was by Sartre, who found that the kind of past tense Camus employed—auxiliary verb and past participle—was used to target (in

Fishing the stream in Hemingway's great story "Big Two-Hearted River;" Nick Adams is presented with third-person terseness; while in *A Farewell to Arms*, Frederic Henry watches Catherine Barkley: "We walked to the door and I saw her go in and down the hall. I liked to watch her move. She went on down the hall. I went on home."

Like the early Hemingway, Camus was able, at least in the first half of *The Stranger*, to stay on the surface, and because of what is *not* said, invite us to imagine depth—"impenetrable, incommunicable, sparkling," in Sartre's words. Kaplan shrewdly suggests that *The Stranger* appealed to American teachers of French who recognized that its simplicity of presentation was "a perfect bridge from language study to literature," while at the same time students could feel they were in the presence of deep thought even though, or perhaps especially because, the words and sentences stayed on the surface.

When, after World War II, the book was published here, the publicity release in *Publishers Weekly* was a full-page advertisement tying up the novel's content in a magic word: "There is no use trying to talk about new French literature unless you are willing to tackle 'Existentialism.'" Although Camus disavowed the Existentialist label—in fact, detested it—this failed to put off readers eager to "tackle" the mysterious new philosophy, or

whatever it was. Along with its more conventional successor, *The Plague*, Camus's novels, supplemented by his essays published in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*, led by easy stages to the Nobel Prize in 1957. Personal magnetism didn't hurt, either: His sexy appearance, with drooping cigarette and trench coat à la Humphrey Bogart, helped to do the trick.

Perhaps the most striking item, in the aftermath of *The Stranger*, was how criticism in the 1980s, under the influence of Edward Said, emphasized the fact that the Arab whom Meursault

Kaplan's words) "a specific moment in the past, not to describe an ongoing past." Sartre was enchanted by the way Camus's sentences were like islands, "one separated from the next by a sense of nothingness," to create an atmosphere that was "passive, impenetrable, incommunicable, sparkling."

Camus said that the book owed a lot to James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, but he might also have mentioned Ernest Hemingway, whose sentences in his early stories, and in the first-person narrative of *A Farewell to Arms*, often produce a comparable effect.



kills had no name and didn't speak. In his best postcolonial manner, Said charged that he and the other Arabs in the story were used merely as background for Camus's "portentous metaphysics." This political reading shifted things away from the well-worn Existentialist one. Kaplan ends with a discussion of *The Meursault Investigation*—a 2013 novel by an Algerian, Kamel Daoud, in which the hero, brother of the Arab killed in *The Stranger*, is furious that his brother was murdered and tells his story—and describes her discovery of a real-life incident that might have inspired Camus's novel.

Kaplan's aim to tell the story of how Camus created his singular book, and her tracing of the aftermath of its publication, couldn't be bettered—and as a book that looks over the novelist's shoulder and tells the story mainly from his point of view, it is absorbing. What it does *not* do, and what would have been worth doing, is offer some critical judgments about the novel as a work of art; not merely how its narrative works, but how valuable that "working" remains. As a historical/literary fact, *The Stranger* surely made a tremendous mark; the question is to what extent it remains, today, a vital piece of fiction. What, besides its skillful narrative, does it have in its favor? Certainly not humor: There is not a single instance of it in 123 pages. But does it have the resources of human feeling and wit, what T.S. Eliot called "the third dimension," found in contemporaries like William Faulkner or the later Evelyn Waugh—or to raise the stakes, in Camus's predecessor, Marcel Proust?

When *The Stranger* was published, A.J. Ayer praised its powers of description but suggested that it is difficult to be interested in someone uninterested in himself. That's unfair, since Meursault does become interested in his fate as a condemned man awaiting the guillotine. But Ayer has a point about a book that doesn't try for the kind of "human" interest readers expect from fiction. Perhaps the literary fate of *The Stranger* is a novel regarded, mainly, as a curiosity. ♦

BCA

# An Iliad Odyssey

*How Homer got the word out.*

BY JOE QUEENAN

Most people figure that when Homer finished writing *The Iliad*, publishing houses were breaking down his door to get first crack at it. Nothing could be further from the truth. When Homer put the finishing touches on his *opus magnum*, he was just another blind Greek poet who had to go out and market his work like everybody else.

This was no piece of cake, given that the major publishing houses were all located in downtown Athens, hundreds of miles away from Homer's home, located somewhere in West Minoa. But what posed an even bigger problem was the unwieldy nature of the work itself. *The Iliad*, it will be remembered, was basically a performance piece, meant to be recited aloud, but existing in no written form. Publishers hated that kind of stuff. It seemed a bit fussy and elitist on the part of the author to operate like this. But it also meant that before Homer could begin lining up buyers for his word-of-mouth epic, he first had to hire someone to sit down and memorize *The Iliad* as it was being recited, and then go to Athens to repeat sample chapters to prospective publishers.

Which he did. Six months later, the man carrying Homer's manuscript around inside his head returned with a gag in his mouth and a graphite shard wrapped around his neck, reading: *Unsolicited oral histories will be returned un-listened to.*

Undeterred, Homer visited a highly respected local oracle to obtain a list of publishing houses that would accept oral submissions from

unknown writers. Then he sent out his mouthpiece again. But the results were uniformly discouraging:

*Dear Applicant:*

*Due to an unusually tight market for epics, we are not in a position to take on any new clients at this moment. We wish you all the best in your personal and professional enterprises.*

And:

*Too negative.*

And:

*No payoff at the end.*

And:

*Amateurish. Why would you kill off Hector instead of Paris?*

And:

*Sorry, no poetry.*

There was also the additional problem of lost manuscripts. One of the part-time oral delivery boys Homer sent out drowned in the Aegean following a series of disrespectful comments about Poseidon that his cousin Bacchus happened to overhear when they were visiting the same tavern in Ephesus. A second had a concussion and forgot most of the important passages. Still another fell in with duplicitous satyrs, who sold him into bondage. And then there was the curious case of the messenger who disappeared for three years, then turned up at the local watering hole one afternoon with this message attached to his soiled loincloth:

*Dear Mr. Homer:*

*Just a little advice. When submitting an oral version of your work, make sure that the person you hire to recite the poem is a sober citizen and not the*

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*boozed-up wino who staggered in here yesterday, mumbled a few words about Diomedes screwing Hera, and then passed out on the carpet just when it was starting to get interesting. Believe me, you're only shortchanging yourself when you hire a screwball like this clown.*

Realizing that he was getting nowhere fast, Homer finally took the advice of other poets and went out looking for an agent. But agents were hard to come by and didn't come cheap:

*Dear Homer:*

*Your work sounds fresh—refreshingly fresh—and I would be positively enthralled to read it. I'll level with you, kiddo: If I had more clients like you, guys who've clearly got the goods, I wouldn't have to charge a reading fee. But I don't, so I do. Let's say 750 drachmas for The Iliad, and another 500 for this second thing you say you've got in draft form. Or how about this: Send me the first nine chapters of The Iliad and an outline of The Odyssey, and I'll quote you a combined price of 999 drachmas for the pair. Hey, I like you, so let's make it 800 even. Or, if you want to send me either of the books in mime form, I could do the pair for a flat 500. Whatever suits you.*

Infuriated by the suggestion that he should pay to have his work read, Homer began sending out sample chapters of *The Iliad* to small presses, employing one person to memorize each section. This led to hard feelings when he decided to rewrite the whole thing, cutting out chapters 7, 9, and 23, which now seemed turgid and flabby. He also nixed the long section about Ajax and Patroclus cavorting with the sultry Nubian goatherd, a subplot that never really worked.

"One man's turgidity is another man's grubstake," said the man who had worked as Chapter 23 for nine years, wandering all over the Hellenistic world, rattling off his chunk of *The Iliad* to anyone who would listen: "Fact is, pal, this is the only thing I'm qualified to do. You cut me off at the knees now and I'll never find another job. You'll have blood on your hands if this thing goes south on me."

Homer knew that this was true. In a society consisting of shepherds, vintners, hoplites, seers, phalanx designers, tyrants, philosophers, and the aforementioned goatherds, it was pretty hard to break into the workforce if the only thing you could put on your résumé was: "Have spent the last nine years working as a sample chapter from an unpublished word-of-mouth epic. Motivated self-starter, willing to start at the bottom."



*'Blind Homer With His Student Guide' (Moses Ezekiel, 1907), University of Virginia*

Nevertheless, money was tight, and Homer had no choice but to lay off the three chapters in question, promising to rehire them when things picked up. Two nights later, coming from a centaur's bachelor party, the blind poet was set upon by a pack of thugs and beaten so badly that he went deaf, too. Though the assailants were never charged, everyone knew it was the three axed chapters that did it, and a few years later, when Homer finally got a few *obols* ahead of the game, he hired a pack of renegade demigods to feed his ex-employees to Circe's giant swine.

Eventually, Homer did find a publisher for *The Iliad*, with *The Odyssey* appearing shortly thereafter. Fame

and fortune followed. Yet many people through the ages have wondered why the great poet didn't write more books, why he decided to throw in the towel after only his second masterpiece.

The truth is, Homer did not stop writing, but spent the last 30 years of his life preparing what he conceived of as his definitive statement on the human condition. A trilogy it was, consisting of *The Hoi Ploy*, a thriller about a Greek plot to assassinate Zeus and replace him with the more fun-loving Apollo; *The Hoarse Trojan*, the heartrending saga of Paris's twin brother Marseille, a night watchman who came down with laryngitis the night the Greeks burned the topless towers of Ilium and therefore could not be heard screaming, "Here come the Greeks! Here come the Greeks!" And finally, the musical *Aunty Tigone!*

Once again, Homer used the word-of-mouth technique (less paper), hiring 65 traveling minstrels to memorize the 65 chapters in the trilogy. When he finally had all 65 chapters ready to go, he threw a huge party for the entire staff, many of whom had never met each other. At some point during the memorable blowout, Chapter 18 (who was Chapter 6's ex-husband) had words with Chapter 6's new boyfriend (who didn't even work in oral

fiction but had a job in a shipyard), and a fight broke out. Chapter 14, an innocent bystander, was killed. The police came over, rounded up a dozen suspects, and detained eight of them.

When Homer was a bit slow dipping into his pocket for the bail money, the detainees flew off the handle, announcing that they'd had it up to here (there) with the lame, anachronistic Mycenaean oral tradition, and were pulling out of the literature racket for good. Several went so far as to cut out their tongues. Whereupon, Homer, now completely fed up with humanity, told the remaining chapters to forget about going to Athens, girded his loins, and quietly retired. ♦

MR. T IN DC / FLICKR

# Surface Depth

*Two modernists ponder the point of existence.*

BY LEANN DAVIS ALSPAUGH



*'Between the Clock and the Bed' by Jasper Johns (1981)*

Midway through this remarkable exhibition exploring the intersection of the Norwegian symbolist Edvard Munch and American artist Jasper Johns is Munch's *Self-Portrait Between the Clock and the Bed*. It depicts the artist approaching 80, gaunt, balding, and unsteady on his feet, in the doorway of his bedroom, a blank-faced case clock to his right, to his left a monastic bed covered in a striped coverlet. The symbolism is obvious: the artist caught between the passage of time and that most intimate of personal furnishings, the bed, site of birth, intimacy, and if one is lucky, death.

*Self-Portrait* is the key to the entire exhibition. Given the premium that our contemporary society places on emotional "honesty," one could hardly expect to avoid it in the art museum—especially in a show subtitled "Love, Loss, and the Cycle of Life." Emotionally, each artist here was a product of

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## Jasper Johns and Edvard Munch

*Love, Loss, and the Cycle of Life*  
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts  
through February 20

his time: Edvard Munch (1863–1944) was formed by 19th-century social progressivism and Freudian concepts of womanhood and sexuality; Jasper Johns, born in 1930, exhibits the anxieties of a gay man turning 50 during the AIDS crisis. Munch was willing to allow psychological states to direct his creativity, while Johns sought to keep emotion under control, neutralizing and distancing it through abstraction or Pop Art sensibility.

Munch was guileless, so lacking in self-consciousness that his depictions of jealousy, desire, and despair are distinctly discomfiting, sometimes even slightly distasteful. Such unabashed representations resulted in lithographs like *Madonna* (1895-1902), in which Munch depicted a sensuous nude woman framed in spermatic particles and a mummified fetus. Odd and

off-putting, the image demonstrates not only Munch's printmaking prowess but also his willingness to take a decidedly bracing view of physical and moral decay.

Johns would appropriate both Munch's marginalia and his sexual imagery in *Dancers on a Plane* (1980), but he is far too reticent an artist to make this a full-blown homage. The sensuousness is so deeply sublimated beneath dense crosshatching that it is virtually impossible to detect anything like what the curators describe as "stylized genitalia." Where Munch gives us sperm, Johns offers a frame of knives, forks, and spoons cast in bronze. Reinterpreting desire and decay as what Johns has called "ritualized manners" distills one of the unavoidable conclusions of this exhibition: Munch was interested in (as Edward Lucie-Smith puts it) "the resonance of feeling . . . not only the bell-stroke, but its reverberation." Johns, however, prefers to allow things to cool off, to push away feeling until it has almost dissipated, leaving an inert image mediated by a labored surface.

Johns first encountered Munch's art in a Museum of Modern Art retrospective in 1950. Within a few years, he would make many of the works for which he is best known, neutralized images of maps, flags, and targets often embellished with stenciled letters and numbers—"things the mind already knows," as Johns has described it. By the 1970s, Johns had been tagged as an abstract expressionist, Dadaist, and Pop Art practitioner. He also became a master printmaker, taking part in the mid-20th-century American printmaking movement alongside Robert Rauschenberg and Jackson Pollock.

Printmaking is, by definition, based on iteration and transformation—creating impressions by ink, acid, or needle on stone, wood, or metal plate for transference to paper or another medium in a process surprisingly open to chance. Munch explored this medium in lithograph, woodcut, and etching, readily grasping the theatrical possibilities of dense black and bleak white (areas left untouched by ink) for self-portraits ranging from elegiac to elusive. The lithograph of *The Scream* (1895) is

arresting, a work of such harrowing intensity that it reinvigorates the ubiquitous color version. The three woodcut versions of Munch's *Kiss* (1898, 1902, 1943) demonstrate his technical expertise as well as his innovative incorporation of wood grain into the image itself. Here, pattern and the assertiveness of the medium transform the conventional idea of love into a complex set of ideas and forces: technique, creativity, *vanitas*, and absence. The artist's hand—and the intractable wood and the jigsaw used to shape it—is vitally present, manipulating the image into an artifact of energy and emotion.

The artist's hand is also apparent in Johns's prints, but all too often the result is enervated, the repetitions and transformations serving to vitiate an already-lifeless image. In the 1970s, Johns began a series of prints, drawings, and paintings based on *Painted Bronze* (1960), a sculpture of the Savarin coffee can in which he soaked paint brushes in his studio. Again, Johns returned to a quotidian object, this time one intimately connected to his identity as an artist. The bronze object, ultra-realistic even down to his fingerprints on the brush handles, proved so durable that it became, in a moment of Pop Art serendipity, something of a brand for Johns, especially after the print version became the poster of his 1977 Whitney Museum exhibition.

A significant portion of the works on view are Johns's crosshatching pieces from the 1970s. Inspired by a passing car covered in hash marks, this motif appealed to Johns (as he described it) for their "literalness, repetitiveness, an obsessive quality, order with dumbness, and the possibility of a complete lack of meaning." As a printmaker, he would have known of crosshatching as a technique to create shadow and volume. The

curators see this technique as a link to Johns's repertoire of other found object motifs. These marks also contain an inherent neutrality, a pictorial technique that allowed the artist to build up an argument, as it were, without the prejudice of knowledge, presupposition, or evidence. The tendency to abstraction is reinforced by a limited palette and an



'Self-Portrait Between the Clock and the Bed' by Edvard Munch (1940)

all-over pattern that gives these works the aspect of a code or puzzle.

This is compelling, from an analytic perspective. But it is only when we reach the gallery that houses Johns's crosshatching finale—*Between the Clock and the Bed* (1981-83)—that everything falls into place. Up to this point, Johns has deployed crosshatching in a number of ways: as a background to the Savarin can, as a depiction of "highly stylized Tantric sexual images," as lyrical monochromatic encaustics. The three monumental canvases here shimmer and vibrate, the crosshatching achieving an almost architectural scale—and a most unexpected sense of vibrancy

and dynamism. Nearby hangs Munch's *Self-Portrait Between the Clock and the Bed*, and next to it is the actual coverlet depicted in the painting, a modest cotton quilt with a geometric pattern in red and black appliquéd strips. Johns would have seen this painting in the 1950 and 1978 Munch exhibits he visited, as well as on a postcard sent by a friend in which the coverlet pattern was expressly pointed out as similar to Johns's own.

Whether Johns picked up the quilt pattern consciously or subliminally is probably irrelevant—after all, he credited inspiration for the crosshatching motif to a passing car—but what he retains from the Munch painting is neither the cliché of the clock nor ponderous associations of the bed as a "site of passage" but the "third thing": that the quilt pattern suggests a figure, that in its system of marks one could comprehend articulations and associations indelibly linked to an individual—or more to the point, to the artist. Johns reimagines these marks, as Rosalind Krauss has pointed out, with a "negative certainty," making his attacks on conventional picture-making about performance, gesture, and irony.

For Jasper Johns, making art is about presentation, not representation, about surface engagement rather than engagement with what is pitiless and ineffable about human existence. A complete lack of meaning is something that Johns sees as inevitable, even desirable, often an end in itself. For Edvard Munch, meaninglessness has no place in existence, much less art. An exploration of what is mysterious about who we are, especially in the depth of the human psyche, yields glimmers of meaning and even hope. To Munch, the very fact of our existence shows that it's worth making the effort. ♦

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# Forward to the Past

*Thinking about the well-oiled 'Star Wars' franchise.*

BY JOHN PODHORETZ

**H**ow is the new *Star Wars* movie, *Rogue One*? How the hell should I know? Does it even matter what you or I think of it? Will any negative feelings we have prevent us and our children and our children's children from seeing the next one, and the one after that, and the one after that—and on and on until someone in the emperor's government realizes that investing most of its defense dollars on a single giant Death Star is a highly questionable way to allocate precious imperial resources?

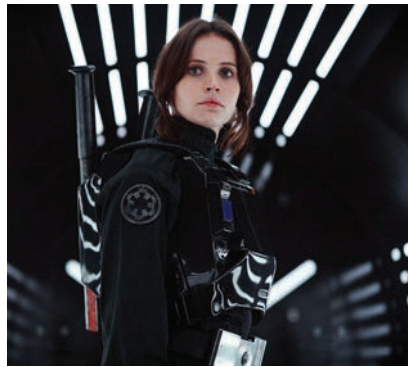
I found *Rogue One* pretty boring, for the most part, especially its first hour, which features no fewer than four opening sequences running back to back to back to back. Still, in the hands of the very gifted director Gareth Edwards, it's absolutely fantastic to look at. The sheer density of the background visuals designed to transport us from the theater and make us feel as though we are in a galaxy far, far away is staggering.

But the story is never even remotely involving. Apparently, after Edwards's first cut, Disney went and hired the writer-director Tony Gilroy (*Michael Clayton*) to make it more interesting, and he didn't get the job done. Unfortunately for Gilroy, the entire movie is structured around a fairly minor plot point in the very first *Star Wars*. So if the question that's haunted you for 39 years has to do with how some stuff got inside R2D2's floppy-disk drive, rest assured you will learn that origin story. Most of us, I'm afraid, couldn't care less.

Even so, *Rogue One* is certainly a respectable piece of work and never for a second embarrassing. For that reason alone it is leagues better than George

## Rogue One: A Star Wars Story

Directed by Gareth Edwards



Felicity Jones

Lucas's three prequels. As the plot did not engage me, and as its script was nowhere near bad enough to grip me with any hilariously awful dialogue, I spent my time in the theater thinking about the decisions Disney made as it went forward with the picture.

Production on *Rogue One* began before *The Force Awakens*—the seventh *Star Wars* film and the first since Disney paid George Lucas \$4 billion (a) for the rights to his galaxy and (b) to make *him* go far far away—was released. Even so, it plays like a purposeful variation on *The Force Awakens*, which is a little odd. After all, *The Force Awakens* was hardly a classic model, given that no one had seen it yet and it might have been a dud. Besides which, nobody went to *The Force Awakens* for the plot.

What the two movies truly share is that they are franchise commodity products designed for the largest possible global mass market. So the stories matter less than the fact that they are carefully calibrated masterpieces

of demography. Both have a semi-orphaned female protagonist—Felicity Jones in *Rogue One*, Daisy Ridley in *The Force Awakens*—who teams up with a member of the Coalition of the Ascendant (John Boyega in *The Force Awakens*, Diego Luna here) in a suggestively pre-sexual military alliance. They are aided by a gorgeous mosaic of supporting players: the Hispanic actor Oscar Isaac there, the Asian actors Donnie Yen and Wen Jiang here, along with the Anglo-Pakistani Riz Ahmed.

The casting of the wonderful Ridley and the charming Jones suggests Disney is consciously following the guide map set in the 1980s and 1990s by James Cameron, who figured out that since a good action adventure movie would get the boys by default, putting a woman at its center (the first two *Terminators*, *Aliens*, *Titanic*) could turn a success into a blockbuster.

As for the multicultural casting, you could look at the efforts to fill most of the smaller parts with ethnics as a form of penance for Hollywood's problematic past in this regard. It put me in mind of a hilarious Richard Pryor bit in the 1970s about going to see *Logan's Run* and Pryor realizing that Hollywood simply assumed there would be no black people in the future. (Yes, I know *Star Wars* is supposedly set in the past; just go with me here.) But really, they are just reflections of the global marketplace at work.

So is the other conscious piece of antidemography. While the original six *Star Wars* pictures revolved around white males—Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, Hayden Christensen—the white males of the new pictures are its villains. Adam Driver is the Darth Vader of *The Force Awakens*, while the great character actor Ben Mendelsohn is the ambitious construction executive tasked with building the Death Star in *Rogue One*. According to news reports, the “alt-right” has been inveighing against *Rogue One* for this very reason. But in the new *Star Wars* universe, it's not bad to be white at all, so long as you're female and have an English accent.

Free associations like these are what can happen when a movie doesn't have a good plot. ♦

John Podhoretz, editor of Commentary, is THE WEEKLY STANDARD's movie critic.

**"I'm told [Donald Trump] now just disclaims that. He now says ['drain the swamp'] was cute, but he doesn't want to use it anymore."  
—Newt Gingrich, NPR interview, December 21, 2016**

**PARODY**

