

the weekly Standard

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GOODBYE TO ALL THAT

CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL
ANDREW FERGUSON
MARK HEMINGWAY
JONATHAN V. LAST
LEE SMITH
& PHILIP TERZIAN
on Obama's legacy



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Fear and Self-Loathing

The *Nation* is publishing its gala hagiographic Obama send-off issue—“The Obama Years: 2008-2016”—and does so perhaps more in sadness than in celebration. The articles are full of complaint and recriminations—but not, for the most part, aimed at the Dear Leader.

There are gripes about the irredeemable electorate, such as the article with the subhead “The president succeeded in repairing our institutions—but millions of Americans wanted to blow them up instead.” There is disgust for the ink-stained wretches (or at least those who would be ink-stained if it weren’t for the Internet): “Barack Obama Was Too Cool for the Press Room: The president’s insistence on thinking before acting drove the media around the bend . . . and towards Donald Trump.” There is wistfulness: “I Miss Our Sane, Calm, Empathetic, Funny, President Already,” is Katha

Pollitt’s headline. And self-loathing: “Before Trump’s election, we on the left didn’t give President Obama enough credit. Why?” is the perplexed cry in Pollitt’s subheadline. And more self-loathing: “Obama Did Not Fail Us—We Failed Each Other,” is the title of Patricia J. Williams’s article lamenting that “we failed to see the storm clouds of 2016 gathering behind the first black president.”

That article, of course, trafficks in the same old racialist macaroni that animates Joan Walsh’s cry (“Liberals once thought Obama would transcend race—but even his moderate views ended up provoking a whitelash”) and Kai Wright’s claim (“His



presidency saw new opportunities for black Americans—as well as the resurgence of white supremacy”). But even such difficulties and disappointments are deftly packaged with deference to the undeniable accomplishments of the great man, as in David Cole’s assertion:

“Today’s turmoil in race relations may be a testament to the progress his administration made.”

And don’t forget the outright bathos: “A Proof, a Test, an Instruction” is the cryptic headline of a weepy article from Marilynne Robinson that declares in the subheadline, “Obama is ours, in the deep sense that Lincoln is ours.” Yes, of course—deep. So deep. ♦

Four Legs Good

For those who will miss the fawning tone and tenor of presidential news coverage to which we have grown accustomed in the age of Obama, there’s always Chinese media and its coverage of the Communist party and its leaders.

Take *China Daily*, which recently brought its hardnosed reporting style to covering President Xi Jinping’s New Year’s address. “Netizens have responded enthusiastically” to the speech, gushed *China Daily* in a lead article titled “Xi’s call for hard work strikes a chord.” The people of the Internet were “equally impressed by the content and inspirational phrasing of the speech, during which he said that ‘only hard work will make dreams come true.’”

China Daily did not fail to point out the tremendous success that was last year’s speech: Xi’s “2016 address



inspired pop songs that incorporated catchphrases from his speech.” This year’s address didn’t disappoint, as the new catchphrases—such as “rolling up our sleeves”—added “a sparkle to the picture of diligence and unity that proved popular among netizens.”

It was not noted how many “netizens” were inspired to adopt as their

own the personal motto of Boxer the horse: “I will work harder!” ♦

Dispatches from the World’s Most Parochial Newspaper

Secretary of State John Kerry recently gave a speech highly critical of the Israeli government. Supporters of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu were outraged; critics, on the other hand, were gratified. And then, just about everyone picked themselves up, dusted themselves off, and turned their attention to Kerry’s designated successor, Rex Tillerson.

Everyone, that is, except Peter Baker, Jerusalem bureau chief of the *New York Times*. Baker examined the story’s coverage in Israel’s two principal newspapers, the right-leaning *Jerusalem Post* and the left-leaning *Haaretz*, and discovered—OMG—

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that they had conspicuously different reactions to Kerry's words: The *Jerusalem Post* declared that "Kerry exits locked into failed assumptions" while *Haaretz* hailed "a very Zionist, pro-Israel speech." At which point, Baker had an epiphany: "In Israel," he wrote, "the reaction to the events of recent days . . . made it clear that Israelis are just as polarized as Americans." And it gets worse:

Just as in the United States, many Israelis cling to their own facts, retreat to their own media outlets, advance their own narratives, and basically just talk with people who think like they do.

It seems that as far as the *Times* is concerned, the worst thing any correspondent can say about a foreign country is that it resembles, or is on its way to resembling, the United States.

The problem, of course, is that the *New York Times* is a curious place to complain about newspaper readers who "cling to their own facts, retreat to their own media outlets," who shun the people who disagree with them about politics. The *Times* daily indulges in what might charitably be called a certain uniformity of opinion, a studied indifference, if not to say hostility, to dissenters.

The other, perhaps more astonishing, problem is Peter Baker's evident inexperience of the world. Yes, *Haaretz* and the *Jerusalem Post* appeal to different political segments of Israeli society, just as the *Wall Street Journal* differs from the *Washington Post*. But this state of affairs is hardly confined to America and Israel, as Baker suggests; and is, in fact, characteristic of most democratic societies that value debate and boast a lively free press.

In Great Britain, a socialist is apt to read the *Guardian* while a Tory takes the *Daily Telegraph*. In France, readers of *Le Figaro* (right) tend to view the world differently from readers of *Le Monde* (left). In Germany, there's not much common political ground between the man who reads *Neues Deutschland* (left) and the woman who buys *Die Welt* (right). And so on.

Indeed, why would anyone as-



sume otherwise? You'd have to live in a world where people "cling to their own facts, retreat to their own media outlets, advance their own narratives, and basically just talk with people who think like they do."

Now, who might that be? ◆

Don't Let's Roll

Great Britain has a new tool for combating the very real threat of terrorism—an app.

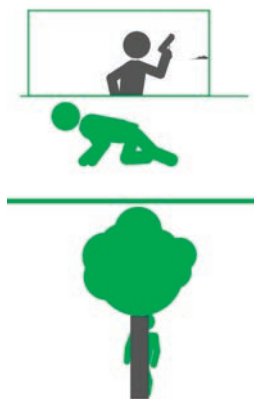
Called "CitizenAID," the app delivers useful information about how to react if a terrorist strikes: Run, Hide, Tell, Treat.

Then again, watching the cheerfully dismal animation on the CitizenAID website, you might be forgiven for thinking that the first strategy—Run—is of limited utility: A small green figure flees past crumpled, bleeding, green figures, only to be shot in the back by a black figure wielding a pistol.

At that point the Hide and Tell (that is, call police) options would seem to be of even less utility. And so there's advice on what to do next—triage. Learning techniques for treating the wounded is the goal here, as one might expect from an initiative affiliated with the Royal Centre for Defence Medicine.

But the nonconfrontational options that make up the rest of the app's information are solidly in line with official British policy. "IN THE RARE EVENT OF a firearms or weapons attack," advises the U.K.'s National Police Chiefs' Council, "RUN HIDE TELL." They explicitly recommend that "It's better to hide than to confront." CitizenAID's helpful icon illustrating the HIDE option shows a person peeking around from behind a tree. (It should be pointed out that this is a lousy way of, as Monty Python put it, "not being seen.") The quality of the hiding notwithstanding, it isn't exactly Churchillian stuff.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has offered decidedly more pugilistic advice: "1. Run, 2. Hide, 3. Fight" are their, er, bullet points.



CitizenAID 'Hide' icons

For those with the foresight to be armed, the advice might instead be "Run, Hide, Shoot Back," but without the running and hiding part. But in general, one is assumed to be at a disadvantage while fighting, and so fighting is suggested only if you have no other choice. But if so, the U.S. advice is to go all in: "Attempt to incapacitate the shooter," DHS suggests. "Act with

physical aggression and throw items at the active shooter."

It may hardly be the best strategy in every circumstance (throwing a desktop stapler at a man with an AK-47 may be the height of folly). But it has been proved—for example, by three resolute Americans on a train from Amsterdam to Paris in 2015—that resistance to terror, even by the unarmed, can have its role to play. ♦

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First-Name Basis

I recently sent an email to the editor of the *London Times Literary Supplement* complaining about his running a longish lead article by a lunatic-of-one-idea feminist who would cite misogyny as the explanation for the behavior of Lady Macbeth, Lucretia Borgia, and the Wicked Witch of the West. He provided a kindly, if not in the least convincing, defense in a reply that began by his addressing me by my first name.

Thirty or so years ago I had a correspondence with an earlier editor of the *TLS* in which, after an exchange of a dozen or so letters, he wrote: “Dear Mr. Epstein, How I wish I could, as Henry James remarked on a similar occasion, leap the bounds of formality and address you by your first name.” What elegant courtesy! “Dear John,” I wrote back, “The bounds are now leapt.” We subsequently became good friends. I may be wrong, but I don’t think the same is likely to happen with the current-day editor, who calls me Joseph right out of the gate.

As a longtime—and seldom listened to—chronicler of changes in contemporary etiquette, I have for some years now noted the increased use of addressing strangers by their first names. Years ago, explaining the depth of one’s friendship with another man or woman, one might say, “Yes, I know him well. We’re on a first-name basis.” Today one is much more likely to say, “I’ve never met Joe. What’s he like?”

When I began my career as a university teacher, I hadn’t decided whether to address my students by their first or last names. Calling the roll of 40 or so students, last names first, I came to “Pipal, Faustin,” at which an earnest redheaded boy returned, “Would you mind calling

me Frosty?” My decision was made. “I address all students by their last names, Mr. Pipal,” I said. And so I did for the next 30 years of teaching.

I’m not sure that there are any university teachers left who today do the same. Now, at their teachers’ request, lots of students call them by their first names. Teaching today, I can easily imagine, on the opening day of class,



writing out my name and office hours on the blackboard, then turning to say, “But you can call me Frosty.”

More than half the calls I get from strangers nowadays begin by their calling me by my first name, Joseph, and not a few of these by its diminutive, Joe. Why does it tick me off, which it does, mildly? The novelist Evelyn Waugh, a famously irascible character, upon his return from a trip to Goa, wrote to his friend Nancy Mitford: “I can bear only intimacy, really, & after that formality or servility. The horrible thing is familiarity.” I am myself not big on servility, and I don’t mind formality, but I’m with Waugh on familiarity, at least when it’s unearned.

As for how familiarity is earned, I should say that it comes, like promotion in the military, with time-in-grade. Familiarity, like seduction, need not be rushed. I remember a favorite student of mine, greeting me shortly after his graduation, as Joe. “Sorry, Eric,” I replied, “but I think you need to wait at least 20 months before you may address me by my first name.” He took it well, and we later became friends. Another favorite student of mine continued to address me as Professor Epstein for at least 10 years after his graduation, even after I had long before insisted on his calling me by my first name. “Besides,” as I instructed him, “the title of professor, with which I’ve never been at all comfortable, strikes me as best restricted to the fellow who plays piano in the bordello.”

If physicians, dentists, or clergymen call me—now a man of a certain age, and then some—by my first name, I return the somewhat ambiguous compliment and call them by theirs. Sometimes people I’ve not met or dealt with before will address me by my first name in letters or emails, and I, an unobliging chap, answer by addressing them by their last names. Sometimes someone will ask me to call him by his or her first name, in which case, within limits, I do. “My personal banker,” a line from a radio commercial for a bank that wanted to establish its seriousness that sticks in my mind ran, “wants me to call him Skippy.” The president of the university where I used to teach, flaunting the democratic spirit of the day, signs his emails and correspondence “Morty.”

If a stranger calls you by your first name today, why not Ace, Chief, Mac, Pally (Dean Martin’s favorite), or Schmuckowitz tomorrow; or, if you are a woman, Honey, Doll, Sweetheart, Babe, Toots? “Familiarity breeds contempt” remains an adage with an unusually high truth quotient.

JOSEPH EPSTEIN

Incurable Obamacare

Democrats are addicted to Obamacare. It has performed poorly, alienated far more people than it has aided, and been a political disaster. Yet Democrats can't shake it. In 2010, it was the issue that delivered the House to Republicans. In 2014, it gave them the Senate. In 2016, it was one of the keys to Donald Trump's capture of the White House.

After all this, a rational party would want to scrap Obamacare or modify it significantly. President Obama has tinkered but nothing more. Democrats act as if it is as essential to national wellbeing as Medicare and Social Security. It's been "a big success," House minority leader Nancy Pelosi declared last week, and there were no reports of eye rolling among her colleagues. "We [had] three goals. One was to lower cost, [another] to improve benefits, and the third, to increase access." That sounds great, but it's only true for those who had no health insurance and now get it free (at taxpayers' expense). The rest of us pay more and our access to specific policies and doctors is limited.

Oddly enough, the premise of the Democratic effort to "rescue" Obamacare is that the health care system will stumble during the transition from the time Republicans repeal it to when they replace it. Democrats want it to be seen as Trumpcare. Republicans will "own it [and] all the problems in the health system," Senate minority leader Chuck Schumer said.

The result will be national chaos, he insisted. "Because you cannot repeal a plan and put nothing in its place," he told *Politico*. Actually, Obamacare will still exist during the "transition" from repeal to replacement by a GOP plan. But Republicans will be in charge of it, Schumer said, "and I believe a year from now, they will regret that they came out so fast out of the box."

Schumer has been wrong before in foreseeing the future of Obamacare. Once implemented, he predicted, it would be popular. Wrong. But Obamacare's situation is different under Republicans. It's already dysfunctional. And Schumer has a point that Republicans may be in for trouble with it on their hands. He certainly hopes so.

Democrats believe they're no longer obligated to defend Obamacare. Instead they're free to concentrate on attacking Republicans, both on their temporary custody of Obamacare and their plans for a free-market, patient-oriented replacement to follow.

A hardy perennial has been added to the mix: Medicare.

It's the most popular program in the history of health care. Obamacare is the least popular. Democrats treat them as two peas in a pod and claim Republicans want to "dismantle" both. In truth, Medicare isn't part of repeal or replace, but that's a fact, one of many, that Democrats ignore.

Medicare, however, may be the least of the problems Republicans will confront. When insurance providers quit the Obamacare exchanges, Republicans blamed President Obama and Democrats. Now blame will go in the other direction. Unfair? Perhaps, but that won't stop the assault on Republicans.

Democrats would like to bribe insurers to stay in the system by covering their losses. Obamacare originally allowed for that, but Republicans got a provision barring these bailouts in the 2015 omnibus budget. Democrats haven't forgotten. It gives them another reason to blame Republicans for the unraveling of Obamacare.

Then there are the inevitable hikes in premiums. The 40 percent increase over the past two years was fodder for Republican attacks. Trump credits the rise in premiums last year with helping him win the White House. Democrats are poised to blame Republicans in 2017. Forget about the real culprit, Obamacare itself.

Democrats have put together a list of horrible things "the Republicans' irresponsible plan" would do. It would dismantle "Medicare, Medicaid, and Obamacare" except for one thing: Such a plan is fiction. Nevertheless, the non-existent plan would "exacerbate the opioid epidemic" and "provide tax breaks for millionaires" and "damage local hospitals." Even if there were a real plan, these accusations would be a stretch.

Other charges are false or hypocritical. Every Republican from Trump on down has said young people can stay on their parents' insurance, and the ban on discrimination against those with previous medical conditions would remain. Yet Democrats insist the GOP would kill both provisions.

Hypocrisy? There's a lot of it. Republicans would "increase health care costs," Democrats claim. They should know. They're well-versed in the cost surge with Obamacare. A plan that cost \$3,750 in 2015 would on average cost \$5,250 in 2017.

As for insurance companies, Republicans want to "put them back in charge," Democrats claim. But Trump and Republicans on Capitol Hill would be hardpressed to do as much for insurers as Democrats have. "Under Obamacare,



the federal government decrees that Americans must buy health insurers' product, which isn't true for any other business in the country—indeed in the history of the country,” Jeffrey Anderson of the Hudson Institute says.

There's a way Republicans can minimize their risk in going from repeal to replace. They can move quickly. If the gap is merely weeks, they'll avoid trouble. If it's months or years, they'll maximize their vulnerability.

The ostensible reason for the Democratic offensive against Republicans on health care is to cajole them into putting off a vote on repeal. It answers Obama's plea to “rescue” Obamacare from being axed. The odds are against success, but what if Republicans collapse and Obamacare survives?

Schumer said Republicans are like the dog that caught the bus. If Obamacare lives on, Democrats will be that dog. But is this what they really want, including the political suffering that the misbegotten health care program carries with it? I think the answer is yes. They're saving a great liberal dream. They can't let it die. They're addicted.

—Fred Barnes

A Disaster He's Proud Of

The Obama chapter in American foreign policy ends like the climax of an action movie—with a fireball growing in the distance and filling the screen as a man in silhouette approaches in slow motion and then veers off camera. Barack Obama has set the Middle East on fire, and now it's spreading.

The Obama administration's nuclear agreement with Iran has emboldened the world's leading state sponsor of terror, which now makes war openly in four Arab states (Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen) and is a growing threat to Israel and Saudi Arabia. The deal with Tehran that Obama boasts of as his signature foreign policy initiative guarantees, as the president himself acknowledged, that Iran will have an industrial-scale nuclear weapons program within 15 years.

After a 40-year absence from the Middle East, Russia has returned to the region, where it bombs Syria's schools and hospitals as America and Europe watch helplessly. Washington's traditional regional allies are scrambling to adjust to the new reality, which for the likes of Israel, Jordan, and Turkey means an opportunistic power on their borders that is allied with their existential enemies.

For Europe, the millions seeking refuge from the conflagration are agents of potential instability on the continent in the years to come; some in their midst are terrorists plain and simple. In just four years, or one presidential term, a civil

uprising that started in Syria became a great Middle Eastern war over a host of sectarian, religious, and political hostilities dating back centuries.

Critics and even admirers of the president say that Syria will be a stain on his record. But that's not how Obama sees it. The death and suffering of so many undoubtedly pains him, as he says. He says he wonders if he could have done anything else. Of course he could have, but he believed he had better reasons not to.

There is probably no other president in the post-World War II period who would not have committed significant resources to toppling Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. Indeed, by 2013, all of Obama's national security cabinet advised him to support the rebels. They believed that the United States had, first, a stake in helping to end a humanitarian catastrophe and, no less important, a vital interest in preserving a 70-year-old order that the conflict threatened to undo.

America's Cold War strategy was relatively simple in outline: We would preserve stability on the European continent, contain Moscow, and protect the resource-rich Persian Gulf, which ensured the free flow of trade on which American prosperity depended. Obama disregarded those principles. Assad's war sent millions to a quickly overwhelmed Europe. Putin's gambit in Syria eliminated Israel's air superiority in the eastern Mediterranean and positioned Russia on NATO's southern border. Iran's harassment of the U.S. Navy in the Gulf signaled to the oil-producing Arab states that since the nuclear deal was more important to Obama than American prestige and the safety of American servicemen and women, they were on their own.

By normal bipartisan American standards, Obama's foreign policy record is disastrous. But that's not how he sees it. For Obama and his closest aides, the last seven years represent a revolution, a transformative period in American foreign policy engineered by a transformative figure.

Obama's foreign policy issued in part from his understanding of global realities but more from his interpretation of the American character. He believed that Americans tend to make a mess of things around the world. Obama is like a narrator in a Graham Greene novel; in our relations with the rest of humanity, as he sees it, we are 300 million naïfs abroad, whose intentions may be good but who lack the tragic sense that the rest of the world feels in its bones. Americans, until Obama came along, had been in the grip of a triumphalist fantasy—American exceptionalism—thinking there was nothing wrong with the world that couldn't be fixed by pointing our guns at it. A shoot-first America was especially dangerous in the conflict-prone Middle East, where everything looks like a nail to a nation that thinks it's a hammer. For Obama, it was vitally important to get the country he was elected to lead off of what he called a “perpetual war footing.”

The sticking point for Obama was that the character of the American people determines the nature of our foreign policy and the establishment that embodies and implements

it. In other words, almost everyone around him, even his own cabinet officials, was part of the problem. Of course Leon Panetta and David Petraeus and Hillary Clinton would argue that he should back the Syrian rebels and obviously John Kerry would think he should hit Assad for crossing the red line that Obama himself had drawn against the use of chemical weapons. “The Blob,” as Obama lieutenant Ben Rhodes called the Washington policy establishment, is incapable of thinking anything else.

“There’s a playbook in Washington that presidents are supposed to follow,” Obama told the *Atlantic* magazine. “It’s a playbook that comes out of the foreign-policy establishment. And the playbook prescribes responses to different events, and these responses tend to be militarized responses.”

As Obama explained, when he declined to hit Assad for crossing the red line, he tore up the playbook. It not only liberated Obama but was a first step in freeing America from its dangerous habit of mind. Whenever that primordial lizard brain surfaced again to argue for force, Obama pushed back. Indeed, this White House argued not that the United States wouldn’t or shouldn’t do things but that it couldn’t do them.

Sure, it would be great to protect Syrian civilians from Assad and Putin. But Russia’s air defense systems are really powerful, so we can’t set up no-fly zones to protect them. Obviously the Pentagon has solutions for Russian systems such as the S-300—like hitting their radar, command-and-

control facilities, or missile batteries—in order to set up a no-fly zone. But Obama wanted America to get used to not thinking of doing things he believed we shouldn’t do.

So there was nothing to be done about the war in Syria. And there was nothing to be done about Iran’s nuclear weapons program except sign an imperfect deal, because the only other choice was war. There was nothing to be done about Putin when his soldiers seized Crimea, then Donbas, then brought down a passenger jet over Ukraine, or when he sheltered Edward Snowden and had his secret police beat up an American diplomat.

Obama’s foreign policy, in the end, was not primarily about the rest of the world—it was about transforming the character of America. So where are we eight years on? Gelded, as he intended.

Consider that for several months now, the country has been consumed with reports of Putin’s cyberwar against American political institutions. It’s become embarrassing to watch this frenzied chorus of politicians and the press beating their chests and rending their clothes for fear that Putin has made us all vulnerable—as if America were some post-Soviet backwater incapable of taking care of its own business, quietly and with dispatch. America before Obama knew how to take care of itself in such confrontations. Let’s hope we can recover that confidence.

—Lee Smith

A Growth Agenda to Unite All Americans

THOMAS J. DONOHUE

PRESIDENT AND CEO
U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

In this time of transition for our country, the business community is optimistic about the year ahead—and realistic about the hard work required to make that optimism a reality. We’re optimistic because we see a once-in-a-generation opportunity to enact major reforms that could transition America from a low-growth to a high-growth economy, creating millions of new jobs and benefiting every American. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s priority for 2017 is to advance the policies and reforms required to foster this dynamic economic growth.

We are focusing on growth because it’s good for everyone. It’s good for Democrats and Republicans, businesses large and small, workers at every wage level, and for a government in desperate need of more revenue to fund its

programs and pay down its debt. It’s the unifying goal our nation needs after a divisive political season.

The decisions policymakers face often come down to a choice between growth and some other priority. Too often in recent years our leaders have chosen against growth. The effects are clear. Today we remain mired in the slowest economic recovery since the 1940s, with annual growth rates hovering around 1% to 2%. These rates will never be enough to create jobs for the millions of unemployed or underemployed Americans, fuel a badly needed resurgence in business startups, or support a stable social safety net for an aging society.

The Chamber’s message to policymakers and incoming leaders is simple: Choose growth. Judge each proposal on the basis of whether it will speed or impede the expansion of our economy. And all our leaders must keep in mind the true stakes of their

choices. A growing economy is not just about numbers; it’s about people. Americans are united by the common desire to leave their children with a better life than the one they were born into. But that sort of upward mobility—the basis of the American Dream—cannot be achieved in a stagnant, shrinking, or sluggish economy.

I will be detailing the Chamber’s growth agenda in the annual *State of American Business* speech this week. I will also outline some of the specific policy proposals discussed in the speech in next week’s column. Throughout the year, the Chamber will continue to call on our leaders in government and business to join in uniting our country around the common cause of stronger, faster, and more broadly shared economic growth for all.



Learn more at
uschamber.com/abovethefold.

Courtiers in Denial

Obama's rapidly shrinking legacy.

BY ANDREW FERGUSON

We shouldn't doubt that President Obama will read the new book by the liberal journalist Jonathan Chait. The title alone will be enough to grab him: *Audacity: How Barack Obama Defied His Critics and Created a Legacy That Will Prevail*. He will read it slowly and carefully, Montblanc at the ready to underline notable passages and jot down marginalia (*How true!* and *Excellent point!* and *Tell it to Michelle!*).

And when he puts it aside he will feel just a little bit uneasy. Maybe he'll even ink a note on the final page: *This is the best they can do?*

Chait writes about politics for *New York* magazine, and in the crowded imperial court of Obama's journalists he stands apart—the courtier's courtier, the boot-licker against whom all boot-licking must be measured. “I am not always right,” he writes at the close of his book, with unusual understatement. “But Barack Obama is a subject I believe I got right, right from the beginning.”

From the start, he says, he saw that Obama had “a keen mind, oratorical gifts, and just the right combination of idealism and skeptical, analytic thinking.” (Obama nods, reaches for the Montblanc.) That Jonathan Chait, he likes him some Barack Obama.

So his book is worth a lingering look, if not much more. It will stand for now as the most comprehensive, full-dress brief for the achievements of Barack Obama—such as they are. Of course, *what* they are, and how many they are, is the subject of hot dispute, and Chait is impatient with anyone who thinks they were less than dazzling, or “transformative,” to use the tired language of Obama

and his acolytes. Chait's original subtitle was about how Obama “transformed America.”

Audacity, Chait writes, “is a book that makes an argument.” It's a hard argument to follow, even when we know the conclusion in advance. Partly this is owing to his promiscu-



ous use of the anecdotes, statistics, and social-science findings that he insists are evidence for his proposition. His first chapter, for instance, makes the case that “Obama's appearance on the national scene made conservatism obsessed with race.” In support of this assertion he immediately produces several revolting anecdotes in which various people made racist statements in public. Only one of these people is identified as a Republican, but a reader will feel that he is to take their stories as representative of the conservative obsession.

Or maybe not. For the next paragraph begins: “These episodes should not be taken as specimens of the authentic Republican base.” Then why include them? Apparently, the stories demonstrated “white racial

panic” because the racists involved publicly denied they were racist. This jolting passage concludes with Chait going psychological: “In their mind, [conservatives] find themselves victimized once by the hoodlums and welfare moochers closing in all around them, and again by a society accusing them of bigotry.”

Anecdotes are only one means by which Chait is able to rummage through the mind of Republicans. Like 99.999 percent of published writers, he swallows stack after stack of dubious social science without a hint of skepticism, so long as he thinks it suits his argument. In the first half of his chapter on race he suggests that race relations in the United States have seldom been so fraught: We live in a “hyperracialized era,” thanks to the white racism inadvertently touched off by Obama. To support this contention, he cites “data” produced by a pair of left-wing political scientists. The findings have been debunked by other social scientists, also on the left. (Pretty much everyone in social science is on the left.) They point out that the design of the studies conflates ordinary conservative political beliefs with racism, making the conclusion simply a function of the premise.

Indeed, by the end of the chapter, Chait is arguing against the argument he made at the start. “Conditions [between the races, presumably] were not really getting worse. They were actually getting better.” His explanation: Over eight years, Obama has led us between “the despair of the left and the obliviousness of the right.” As evidence he cites the debunking social science that is often used to refute the data he cited earlier. Whatevs! All political writers have a weakness for the sweeping generalization. (How's that for a sweeping generalization?) Fewer have the gift of making a sweeping generalization and then, within living memory of the first sweeping generalization, make a sweeping generalization that contradicts the earlier one. He keeps a reader on his toes.

It's possible that Chait's argument is hard to follow because of its subtlety

GARY LOCKE

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and fine distinctions, but I don't think so. Other chapters sink into pure propaganda and give the game away. His chapter on Obamacare—titled, so help me God, “Obama Cares”—is a mishmash of false assertion and excuse-making. Like other Obamacare champions, Chait wants to persuade readers that the Affordable Care Act is a pragmatic, incremental, even conservative adjustment that gently redirects the health care system down a fairer and more sustainable path. At the same time, it is utterly revolutionary—“one of the most ambitious and successful social reforms in the history of the United States.” Transformative, you could say.

Well, we shall soon see. Chait glides over the public's widespread unhappiness with the law and waves off the recent surge in health care costs and the deadly rise in insurance premiums. The creepy, authoritarian manner in which the legislation was passed and is now being enforced is evidence of Obama's “moral resolve.” Chait litters his chapter with nakedly false statements like this: “as insurance goes, the exchange plans have turned out to be reliable and affordable.” And this: “Even the most conservative elements within the Republican party deemed [Mitt] Romney's health care [plan] a sound basis for a national plan.” And this: “In the interim [Obamacare] is likely to begin wreaking havoc with the health care sector—raising insurance premiums, health care costs, and public anxieties.”

Wait! That last statement is actually true. But it comes from the writer (and Obamacare critic) Yuval Levin, who said it in 2010. Chait quotes Levin mockingly, as though events have proved him wrong rather than right. Later he quotes Levin “gasp-ing” the following prediction, also in 2010: “The apparent decision to push Obamacare through reconciliation gives new meaning to the term political suicide.” Levin was right about that too.

Obama, of course, was reelected after Obamacare passed, and I suppose this is why Chait thinks it hasn't proved politically suicidal. To the

contrary, he ends the book on a triumphalist, even Caesarean, note.

“The Obama presidency completed the tectonic shifts that had begun in the 1960s,” he writes. Under Obama the Republican coalition had been rendered a weak and shrinking anachronism. “The Obama presidency was able not only to advance the interests of its new and growing coalition but also to represent its values: humane, pragmatic, open to evidence and science, and welcoming to outsiders and diverse perspectives.”

Early reviewers' copies of *Audacity* arrived before the election, and reading these passages after November 8 I grimaced a little, and not simply because of their vanity and self-congratulation. As a fellow hack I sympathized with the amount of rewriting Chait would have to do; the book is shot through with the assumption that Obama's designated heir would also be his successor in the White House, fortifying his achievements.

As it happens, the horror of the Trump ascendancy has forced him to rewrite a little, but not enough. In

fact, Trump's victory and the repudiation of Obama's heir only reinforce Chait's argument, because . . . because it just does.

“Trump's surprise victory gave [Republicans] a last-gasp chance to stave off defeat,” he writes. “Conservative Republicans won power but they lost the future.” That's a hard statement to disprove. We won't know whether he's correct until the future gets here. We'll have a long wait.

Chait's argument for the durability and ultimate triumph of Obama's coalition rests on the familiar belief that demography is destiny, though it often isn't. He also has to ignore the electoral devastation suffered by the party Obama has led since 2008. Not since the 1920s, when the country was aswoon over the manly Coolidge, have Democrats been so weak at the state, local, and national levels. We don't need to wait for the future to predict that a coalition built around the peculiar qualities of a single politician isn't likely to last.

Not transformative, in other words. But it's the best they can do. ♦

Identity Politician

You know a president by the fights he picks.

BY JONATHAN V. LAST

A year ago, as he prepared to give his final State of the Union speech, President Obama strode the halls of the Capitol while being interviewed by NBC's Matt Lauer. Lauer asked the president, in his friendly and earnest way, if he “takes responsibility” for the fact that Donald Trump was catching fire in the Republican primaries. Obama responded with a smirk, “Talk to me if he wins. Then we'll have a conversation about how responsible I feel about it.”

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Well.

If you are tabulating Barack Obama's legacy in American politics, you will note some fundamental changes he ushered in: He expanded the boundaries of majoritarianism by destroying the filibuster and dramatically expanding the welfare state on a party-line vote. After being rebuked by voters and losing control of the House, he enlarged executive power to an almost cartoonish degree. And all along the way he encouraged lawlessness by picking and choosing the laws to be enforced, rather than going to the trouble of repealing or changing laws with which he disagreed. This

runs the risk of reducing America to a banana republic, where the laws are whatever the current *jefe* says they are, at the moment.

Yet of all the changes the Obama years introduced to American politics, the most destructive may turn out to be his eager embrace of identity politics.

One of the ironies of Obama's political career is that he came to prominence by giving a speech smoothing over and minimizing political differences. In his 2004 speech at the Democratic convention in Boston, Obama insisted that, at heart, we Americans are all pretty much alike, holding similar beliefs and wanting the same things for our nation.

But from the moment he was sworn in (literally from that moment—his 2009 Inaugural Address was extraordinarily divisive), President Obama went out of his way to pit groups of Americans against one another.

First, there was his decision to send his Justice Department after the Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School, in Redford, Michigan. The school had fired a “called” teacher and was sued by Obama's EEOC on the grounds that churches could only apply the ministerial exception to hiring and firing rules—that is, the exception guaranteed by the Constitution's provision for freedom of religion—to people whose duties were *solely* ministerial.

It's difficult to overstate how radical this position was. Consider that even Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Sonia Sotomayor would join the Supreme Court's unanimous opinion against the EEOC, calling its interpretation “extreme.” (At oral arguments, Justice Elena Kagan called the government's contention “amazing.”)

What looked at first like a one-off mistake turned out to be a pattern. Obama used his Health and Human Services Department to insist that *all* employers were required, under Obamacare, to provide coverage for contraceptives, abortifacients, and sterilization—even religious employers like the Little Sisters of the Poor.

It's important to understand that this was a purely administrative—not

a legal—decision. The entire Rube Goldberg machinery of Obamacare is run on exemptions and waivers and delays, where the text of the Affordable Care Act says one thing and Obama's administration simply decides to do another. But in the case of the Little Sisters of the Poor, Obama actively decided to prosecute the nuns and break them on the rock of contraception and abortifacient coverage. It was a war of choice.

As with Hosanna-Tabor, Obama ultimately lost the battle—the Supreme Court ruled unanimously against the president. But he won the war, because his persecution of the Lit-



The White House, June 26, 2015

tle Sisters of the Poor was part of the broader strategy of his 2012 reelection campaign, which was predicated in part on the idea that Republicans were waging a “war on women.”

And it worked: Obama ran up huge margins among unmarried women, to go along with his historic margins among African Americans, millennials, and Hispanics. The lesson of 2012 was that, as distasteful as it might be, identity politics works.

There was more. In the run-up to the 2012 election, Obama's Department of Homeland Security issued a directive forbidding Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents from deporting certain illegal immigrants under the age of 30. That was his way of circumventing the reforms in the DREAM Act that he couldn't achieve legislatively. Two weeks after the 2014 midterm election, Obama went further, declaring—again by executive fiat—amnesty for roughly 3.5 million illegal immigrants.

At every turn, you could see Obama seeking to reinforce the idea that his supporters were locked in a struggle against the Other. On June 26, 2015, after the Supreme Court created a constitutional right to same-sex marriage with the *Obergefell* ruling, Obama had the White House illuminated in rainbow colors. Why did he do it? Obama had campaigned against same-sex marriage in 2008. He did it because turning the White House into a symbol of support for same-sex marriage was spiking the football—a way not to convert persuadable citizens, but to emphasize to his supporters that this was a victory for Us against Them.

And then there were the bathrooms. In May of last year, the Obama administration issued a joint letter from the departments of Education and Justice saying that all public schools must allow students to use whatever bathroom facilities they choose—or risk losing their federal funding. Again, there was no practical reason for Obama's edict. It was a solution in search of a problem—and one that promised to create conflict rather than quell it. It was a cynical way to try to highlight political divisions along the lines of personal identity.

Then again, maybe it wasn't cynical. This may be how Obama genuinely views the world. The first time Obama showed his instincts for identity politics came in April 2008, after the Pennsylvania primary, which he had lost to Hillary Clinton by 10 points. In what would turn out to be a nearly perfect preview of his presidency, Obama told an audience in San Francisco:

You go into these small towns in Pennsylvania and, like a lot of small towns in the Midwest, the jobs have been gone now for 25 years and nothing's replaced them. And they fell through the Clinton administration, and the Bush administration, and each successive administration has said that somehow these communities are gonna regenerate and they have not.

And it's not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy toward people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations.

ABOVE AND OPPOSITE: WHITE HOUSE PHOTOS

It turns out that the bitter clingers were paying attention. Because in 2016, they figured out how to make identity politics work for them.

Over the last eight years, Republicans warned, repeatedly, that the Obama mode of governance would be harmful to the body politic. Now Democrats face Republican majorities in both houses of Congress, a

president with a seemingly unlimited view of executive power, and a movement that has found a way to harness the power of identity politics for its own side.

Barack Obama truly was the transformational president he sought to be. Perhaps, at some point, Democrats will want to have a conversation with him about that. ♦

Celebrity in Chief

Our first TV star president.

BY PHILIP TERZIAN

“[The British monarchy’s] mystery is its life. We must not let in daylight upon magic.”
—Walter Bagehot

To a certain degree, Bagehot’s law was adopted as well by American presidents, whose status was upheld by a tradition of decorum and whose prestige was accentuated by a certain—well, mystery. George Washington spent much of his adult life rehearsing the role of national patriarch; even Andrew Jackson jealously guarded the dignity of his office. Once, when William Allen White was interviewing William McKinley, a photographer entered the room to take pictures. McKinley promptly set aside his cigar: “We must not let the young men of this country,” he told White, “see their president smoking!”

With time, of course, that sense of decorum, of self-conscious distance, eroded as standards evolved. Theodore Roosevelt’s young family—his elder daughter’s wardrobe, his school-age sons’ mischief—attracted the attention of the press. His cousin Franklin addressed the public directly by radio, affecting a deliberately casual manner. Yet even by 1962, when television cameras were brought into the White House for a prime-time tour of the

premises by Jacqueline Kennedy, her interlocutor addressed the first lady with elaborate deference. And when the president himself briefly appeared toward the end of the program, it was as if he had descended from Olympus into the upstairs sitting room.

Nowadays, of course, we tend to equate dignity with pomposity, and like to point and laugh at the examples of Dwight D. Eisenhower avoiding the raucous White House Correspondents’ Dinner, and Richard Nixon walking along the beach in dress trousers. Gerald Ford toasting his own English muffin was a reassuring sight to Americans in the aftermath of Watergate, as was Jimmy Carter’s Inaugural hike up Pennsylvania Avenue. But informality can be a two-edged sword, as Lyndon Johnson discovered when he revealed his scar from gall-bladder surgery. And the slope from the flesh of a presidential gut to presidential DNA on a blue dress is a slippery one.

Which brings us to what might be called the Obama Paradox. The president’s admirers like to point to what they call his dignity, perhaps mistaking his famously detached manner for something it is not. As every American can see and hear, the president is not a demonstrative person and, by all accounts, not an especially warm individual, either: Obama has tended to treat Democrats on Capitol Hill with



Barack does Letterman . . .



. . . and The View . . .



. . . and Jimmy Kimmel . . .



. . . and The Daily Show, and . . .

the same deference as Republicans—which is to say, very little—and his personal loyalty is largely reserved for his own person. Still, all presidents are egotists, to some degree, and it’s no crime to be the rare White House introvert. What makes Obama unique is the extent to which he has also made himself painfully ubiquitous. Whereas presidents have tended to nourish

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their prestige by conserving public exposure—there’s that “mystery” again—Obama has made himself virtually unavoidable.

All presidents are also celebrities, by default; but Barack Obama is the first president who has tended to behave like the modern definition of one. Of course, it would be one thing if he and the first lady were habitual visitors to the opera or regularly sought diversions consistent with their Ivy League diplomas. But even middlebrow culture seems to leave Obama cold. He seems happiest when hanging out with his many admirers in show biz, and his routine appearances on television are not confined to the news.

Indeed, until Obama, presidential performances on TV—apart from speeches and press conferences—were essentially unknown. It would be difficult to imagine FDR making a cameo appearance on Jack Benny’s radio program or Ike swapping stories with Jack Paar. Even televised interviews—Walter Cronkite with JFK (1963), Nixon with a quartet of network correspondents (1971)—were so rare as to be sensations. But a threshold of sorts was crossed, in 1992, when candidate Bill Clinton showed up on Arsenio Hall’s late-night talk show and played the saxophone. As much as anything, the performance was an emblem of the long-shot status of the Arkansas governor’s candidacy, and President Clinton never repeated the stunt. But then candidate George W. Bush paid a visit to Oprah Winfrey in 2000, and the rest is history.

Obama has raised ubiquity to an art form. The president, who is alleged to be an occasional smoker, has been (like his predecessor McKinley) careful to conceal his habit from the public. But there seems to be no limit to the number, or character, of TV programs he repeatedly visits: *Good Morning America*, *Today*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and “slow-jamming the news” on *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* might be said to have some tenuous connection to the public interest; but the list includes more dubious venues such as *The View*, *The Colbert Report*, *The Late Show with David Letterman*,

Jimmy Kimmel Live!, *Ellen*, *The Daily Show*, *Live! with Kelly and Michael*, even *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee* and *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*, among others.

It’s impossible to picture Ike, or even his successor JFK, on a program called *Full Frontal*. But this

is the world we inhabit. Donald Trump, unlike Barack Obama, is not especially welcome in such precincts; but he is a creature of the television culture and, after Obama, anything is possible. The daylight now shines like a klieg light on the magic, and the mystery is gone. ♦

Scandals Aplenty

The media just pretended they didn’t exist.

BY MARK HEMINGWAY

Less than a fortnight after his successor was elected, Barack Obama got to work on shaping his legacy. “I’m extremely proud of the fact that over eight years we have not had the kinds of scandals that have plagued other administrations,” he said. On January 1, White House consigliere Valerie Jarrett—does any-



Scandal-free! Except *Fast and Furious* . . .

one have a firm grasp on what her actual job description has been over two terms?—appeared on CNN and reiterated the sentiment: “The president prides himself on the fact that his administration hasn’t had a scandal and that he hasn’t done something to embarrass himself.”

As achievements go, this would be one in which a modern president could take pride. But in making the claim for himself, Obama proves he cannot even accurately describe the

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events of his presidency. His tenure saw an astounding number of scandals: Benghazi, *Fast and Furious* gun-running, Solyndra and green energy subsidies for campaign donors, cash for Iranian hostages, IRS targeting of conservative groups, spying on journalists, Hillary Clinton’s private email server, the Veterans Administration disaster, trading deserter Bowe Bergdahl for five Taliban leaders held in Guantánamo, droning American citizens without due process, and firing inspector general Gerald Walpin for investigating an Obama crony who was abusing federal programs. And that list isn’t exhaustive.

The media have certainly tried their best to buttress Obama’s claim to have presided over a scandal-free administration—starting long before he even made it. In 2014, *New Yorker* editor and Obama biographer David Remnick told the (skeptical) host of PBS’s *Charlie Rose* that the president had already racked up “huge” achievements. On his list: “The fact that there’s been no scandal, major scandal, in this administration, which is a rare thing in an administration.” Remnick was hardly alone. Veteran journalist Jonathan Alter wrote a column for Bloomberg back in 2011 headlined “The Obama Miracle, a White House Free of Scandal.” More recently, Glenn Thrush, then a *Politico* reporter, tweeted, “As Obama talks up legacy on campaign trail important

NEWS.COM

to note he's had best/least scandal-scarred 2nd term since FDR." Even conservative *New York Times* columnist David Brooks last year declared the Obama administration "remarkably scandal-free."

Remnick's remark is particularly notable for how it presaged White House talking points. Obama's chief campaign strategist David Axelrod was asked at the University of Chicago in 2015 about the administration's broken promise to bar lobbyists from working for it. Axelrod admitted things hadn't been "pristine" but said, "I'm proud of the fact that, basically, you've had an administration that's been in place for six years in which there hasn't been a major scandal."

As Noah Rothman observed in *Commentary*, "The qualifier 'major' lays the burden on shoulders of the press to define what constitutes a serious scandal, and political media had thus far reliably covered the administration's ethical lapses as merely the peculiar obsessions of addebrained conservatives."

So what would constitute a "major" scandal? Would it involve, say, dead bodies? The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives gave thousands of guns to Mexican drug cartels; they used some of them to kill dozens of people, including American border patrol agent Brian Terry. When Congress tried to investigate why the ATF gave away so many guns and failed to track them, the Department of Justice engaged in unprecedented stonewalling. The department withheld 92 percent of the documents requested and forbade 48 relevant employees from speaking to congressional investigators. Attorney General Eric Holder was ultimately held in contempt of Congress, with 17 Democrats supporting the measure. An explanation for why the ATF gave thousands of guns to violent criminals has yet to emerge—but we are to understand that this is not a "major" scandal.

Four Americans, including the ambassador to Libya, died in a premeditated terrorist attack in Benghazi two months before Obama's



... and IRS persecutions ...



... and a Benghazi attack and cover-up ...



... and dealing killers for Bergdahl ...



... and paying ransoms to Iran, and ...

reelection. The White House claimed, though it almost immediately had evidence to the contrary, that the raid was fallout from a spontaneous protest over an American anti-Muslim YouTube video. The maker of the video was promptly arrested on old, unrelated charges. The CBS news program *60 Minutes* recorded Obama refusing

to rule out the possibility Benghazi was a terrorist attack in an interview the day after it occurred but didn't broadcast it. A transcript of Obama's stunning concession was quietly released a few days before the election, but by then the waters had been sufficiently muddied so that it was difficult for Mitt Romney to press his case that Obama had lied. (The GOP candidate was famously interrupted by moderator Candy Crowley when he tried to make this point in one of the presidential debates.) It probably helped that Obama's deputy national security adviser Ben Rhodes, who would later brag about dishonestly selling the Iran nuclear deal, is the brother of CBS News president David Rhodes. There were four dead bodies at the heart of a political cover-up, but the media attacked the subsequent investigation as an overreach of an obsessive Republican Congress.

Unforeseen events such as Benghazi often prompt a cover-up that leads to scandal. The Obama administration, however, took disrepute to the next level. Its two major achievements, Obamacare and the Iran nuclear deal, were *premised on a strategy that embraced overt dishonesty*.

It's liberating to know that you can tell whatever lies are politically useful without consequence. The Obama administration could almost always count on the media to back it, regardless of the contortions necessary. The most brazen untruth the administration used to sell Obamacare was "if you like your health care plan, you can keep it." Pulitzer Prize-winning "fact checker" PolitiFact rated Obama's oft-repeated claim "true" six different times, right up until the year after Obama was reelected and millions lost their health insurance after the key provisions of Obamacare went into effect.

In the case of the Iran deal, the administration had more direct help: An outside group, the Ploughshares Fund, provided a grant for an email listserv in which liberal journalists honed talking points and directed swarms of supporters to shut down anyone advancing arguments critical

TOP TWO IMAGES: NEWS.COM

of the deal. Ploughshares also gave more than a hundred thousand dollars to left-leaning media outlets such as NPR to ensure arguments in support of the White House's Iran policy were heard.

"We created an echo chamber," Ben Rhodes later told the *New York Times* in explaining how the administration sealed the Iran deal. Policy experts and members of the media "were saying things that validated what we had given them to say."

The question is: Why was the press such a willing partner? Several Obama scandals, after all, revolved around the administration's mistreatment of the media. Obama's Justice Department, frustrated by leaks to reporters, used the 1917 Espionage Act—a law so expansive it was used to jail people who distributed flyers protesting the draft in World War I—to justify spying on the Associated Press newsroom and Fox News national security correspondent James Rosen. James Goodale, the lawyer who represented the *New York Times* in the landmark Pentagon Papers press freedom case, declared that "President Obama will surely pass President Richard Nixon as the worst president ever on issues of national security and press freedom." The steadfastly fawning coverage of Obama is even more difficult to fathom when you realize the masochism it must have entailed.

In the end, the real legacy of the Obama presidency might be that after eight years of constant misconduct with media-assisted denial, abuse of power and betrayal of the public trust are no longer scandalous by default. The media certainly seem puzzled that Americans tuned out their shrieks about Trump's tax returns and sexist remarks. But thanks to Obama, determining what constitutes a scandal is no longer straightforward. It is like a zen koan, in which the question is more evocative than answerable: What is the sound of one hand clapping? If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? And is it a scandal if the media refuse to say it is? ♦

Infrastructure Dangers Ahead

How conservatives can construct a better agenda.

BY YUVAL LEVIN



A 1998 Federal Highway Administration map showing 'average annual daily truck traffic'

A big federal investment in infrastructure is one of the few things that Donald Trump has specifically said he wants to pursue early in his presidency. It is not as high a priority for most congressional Republicans, to put it mildly.

In fact, their work so far on the coming legislative year suggests that House and Senate leaders hope they might push infrastructure off the agenda by getting started early on health care and tax reform. Two major initiatives, both pursued through reconciliation bills (the failure to pass a budget resolution in 2016 allows for two reconciliation measures in 2017), would already make for an unusually intense legislative year. A third major initiative, even though it would involve different committees and

coalitions, would not be easy to squeeze in—particularly as a new president without experience in pressing his priorities in Congress gets his sea legs.

And yet, precisely because the congressional Republicans' two key priorities are both set to be pursued through essentially partisan reconciliation bills, it may be hard to avoid an infrastructure bill. The new administration will want to do something with the Democrats, and infrastructure offers the prospect of a bipartisan measure that could furnish ribbon-cutting photo opportunities for years to come. It will also be the foremost priority of Gary Cohn, whom Trump has appointed to lead his National Economic Council. That means an important portion of the White House staff will press the issue.

In both respects, infrastructure could be for the Trump team what No Child Left Behind was for George W. Bush in his first year: The Bush team prioritized the bill's bipartisan potential above any policy particulars, and

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FEDERAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION

Bush's domestic policy adviser, Margaret Spellings, was especially committed to it.

The analogy should worry congressional Republicans. So to avoid getting stuck with a choice between voting for a sopping legislative mess or opposing one of the foremost priorities of a new president of their own party, those Republicans need to be thinking about what a reasonable infrastructure measure might look like. At the very least, they need an approach of their own to reinforce the case for opposing a bad bill.

And they must do that in full recognition of two particular dangers to be avoided. The first is simply the danger of wasting lots of money on pork and on projects unlikely to contribute much to the state of America's infrastructure. Many conservatives in Congress are well aware of that danger. It's why they are not excited about a big infrastructure bill. But the second distinct risk of infrastructure legislation is less obvious. Simply put, moving carelessly toward an infrastructure package could cost conservatives the earmark ban they worked so hard for a few years ago.

The ban is already in a precarious state. House Republicans were set to vote on whether to renew it in late November, and their leadership had to step in and "delay" the vote into this year—because it seemed suddenly like there might be a majority in the conference in favor of bringing back earmarks. The party's leaders aren't all opposed to ending the ban themselves, but they knew that the conference wasn't ready for the political shock that an unexpected vote to do so would have involved. Putting a large pot of infrastructure money on the floor would surely strengthen the desire to bring back earmarks and could well render it irresistible.

Conservatives therefore will need an alternative, not just resistance. What would that look like? A plausible approach could involve three elements, each geared to economic growth and the efficient use of public resources: reforming permitting rules, alleviating key bottlenecks in the transportation

system, and otherwise devolving decisions about project spending to states and localities.

The first is a form of deregulation, and one that has garnered a fair bit of bipartisan backing in recent years. Significant infrastructure projects are now routinely held up for years in the federal permitting process, rendering both public and private infrastructure spending less effective and contributing enormously to the backlog of essential projects.

Congress has tried to address the problem, most recently through the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (or FAST) Act enacted at the end of 2015. And the Obama administration actually tried a series of administrative measures to take on the problem too. All of these, however, have tended to focus on consolidating the review process to enable better oversight. That's a good idea, to be sure, and there are further steps along those lines that would make sense: Alaska senator Dan Sullivan has proposed requiring the permitting agencies to provide approvals or denials within a set period of time, for instance, so that if the time limit were exceeded the project would be deemed approved.

But beyond finding ways to accelerate all the permitting that's now required, Congress should also cut down on the requirements—for instance, reducing the range of environmental concerns that require review under the National Environmental Policy Act and allowing such reviews to build on those conducted for similar projects in the past, rather than beginning from scratch with every application. Aggressively reducing federal permitting requirements would act as a multiplier of whatever else was done in an infrastructure bill, far better enabling federal, state, and local infrastructure spending to actually make a difference and thereby also encouraging more investment.

Second, in thinking about projects to be funded, congressional Republicans should prioritize the easing of bottlenecks in America's transportation infrastructure. And they should focus on bottlenecks in the

movement of goods before those in the movement of people.

This is not how politicians naturally incline to think about throwing money at construction projects, of course. But precisely because of how the political system tends to approach infrastructure, there is some relatively low-hanging fruit to be picked when it comes to major bottlenecks in the movement of cargo. Antiquated rail tunnels around Baltimore, for instance, create major choke points with huge implications for how goods move up and down the East Coast—and they also add to the number of trucks on highways, slowing the movement of people. The rail networks that converge in Chicago confront similar bottlenecks that create huge costs and delays.

America's inland waterways, which are essential to our freight-transportation system, feature similar choke points begging to be addressed. And as with rail bottlenecks, an unusual number of them are in the Midwest, which Republicans with their eyes on electoral dynamics naturally find themselves much interested in after this election. The country's major seaports could also benefit from some upgrades that have enormous potential to spur growth.

Those kinds of projects are what public (and particularly national) investments in infrastructure ought to emphasize. Their purpose should be, like the government's role in a market system more generally, to help our economy function more effectively, enabling competitive markets in ways those markets are unlikely to take up themselves.

The movement of cargo isn't more important than passenger transportation, but it's less likely to already have a political constituency behind it, particularly at the state and local level. And it is also often (though not always) less likely to involve infrastructure upgrades that could readily be paid for by user fees, tolls, or other sources of profits for builders and investors, and so might require some public funding to spur action. These kinds of needs can be harder to see, and the ways in which people involved in politics tend

to personally experience the transportation system can badly distort how government funds infrastructure. Someone who describes a new passenger-rail tunnel into Manhattan as a high national priority is likely to be someone who frequently travels to and from Manhattan and needs a broader definition of “national.” To the extent that infrastructure spending is determined at the national level, it should focus on genuinely national needs with the potential to spur the growth of the national economy.

But of course, most infrastructure spending shouldn’t be determined at the national level, because needs and priorities differ in different parts of our vast country. Therefore, if conservatives are going to offer support for new infrastructure legislation, the third element of any proposal they offer should involve setting the country on a course toward devolving more infrastructure policy toward the state and local level, where most of it belongs.

For instance, as a number of conservatives in Congress have proposed in recent years, such legislation could significantly reduce the federal gas tax and allow states and localities to hike it back up to the degree they desire, raising revenue (while their residents only pay as much in taxes at the pump as they do now) for transit, roads, pipes, and other infrastructure projects better prioritized by policymakers closer to the ground.

States should also be allowed to establish new tolls on the Interstate Highway System, which they can do today only by building specialized new lanes or by begging the Transportation Department for hard-to-get exemptions. More generally, a new infrastructure bill should try to define in some bounded way the federal role in infrastructure policy. The lack of clear boundaries on this front, as in so many areas of contemporary federalism, is an enormous obstacle to effective public policy at all levels.

A bill with these three elements would stand some chance of advancing conservative priorities while meeting Donald Trump’s stated objectives. It would still be likely to waste a fair bit

of public money. And it wouldn’t guarantee the survival of the earmark ban, which faces real peril in the new Congress. But on net, it could trade some temporary spending for more enduring structural changes in our infrastructure policy, while trying to focus that spending as well as possible.

That is the kind of approach that conservatives should look to more generally in contending with Trump administration initiatives that aren’t up

their alley. There will surely be many opportunities to advance conservative proposals in the coming years. But there will also be many instances when conservatives need to resist and restrain and to approach the new president transactionally. That will mean prioritizing structural reforms and the reinforcement of constitutional boundaries over more ephemeral policy questions where necessary. Infrastructure offers a good place to start. ♦

A Basket of Deplora-Bowls

The college football glut.

BY GEOFFREY NORMAN



USC's Chris Edmondson kicks a Rose Bowl-winning field goal, January 2, 2017.

We ate black-eyed peas on New Year’s Day, the way you are supposed to in the South, where my wife and I were raised. We live in Vermont now, but we were told when we were kids to eat black-eyed peas for luck, and why take chances?

They go best, for me, with some

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football. College football, that would be, in a matchup of two great teams in one of those “traditional” bowl games. The Orange Bowl, perhaps, in Miami, or the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans; the Cotton Bowl in Dallas, say, or the most sanctified of all those games, the Rose Bowl in Pasadena.

This New Year’s Day, there were no bowl games. Blame it on the calendar. January 1 fell on a Sunday, and the Rose Bowl couldn’t be played on

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the Sabbath for reasons having to do with horses and some sort of late-19th-century ordinance. Hard to imagine California with blue laws, but there it is. So this year, the Rose Bowl (and the Cotton and Sugar, as well) was played on January 2. And to my taste, the games were not the same without the peas, just as the peas had not been the same without the games.

Sure, there was professional football to watch on New Year's Day. But no regular-season NFL game could match the innocent exuberance of the legendary bowl games, still talked about by aficionados of the sport. Like Texas and Southern Cal in the 2006 Rose Bowl—a game that Texas won 41 to 38 with a last-minute touchdown. USC was playing for its third consecutive “national championship,” and it was the last game that Keith Jackson ever broadcast, which was of moment to all serious fans of college football.

And then there was the 1984 Orange Bowl, when Nebraska, behind 31-30, went for a 2-point conversion to win the “national championship” against Miami and came up short. Not to mention the 2007 Fiesta Bowl, when Boise State—*Boise State?*—beat Oklahoma 43-42, in overtime. And on and on, back into the mists of football time and legend.

There were, sadly, no such games on New Year's Day. No bowl games at all, whether nail biters or blowouts. And it felt like the only day since about, oh, Thanksgiving when where *wasn't* a college bowl game of some sort being played in some forgettable location between two undistinguished teams.

There had been, for instance, the Gildan New Mexico Bowl back on December 17, in which the Roadrunners of the University of Texas at San Antonio played the University of New Mexico Lobos, who won the game 23-20. There followed, among others, the Popeyes Bahamas Bowl played in Nassau, the Dollar General Bowl played in Mobile, Alabama, and the Camping World Independence Bowl, played in Shreveport between North Carolina State and Vanderbilt, teams with identically mediocre records of 6-6. It was once rare for a team playing

in a bowl to have lost more than a game or two. But when you have to field teams in 41 bowl games, you take what you can get including, even, a couple of teams with losing records.

The word “glut” seems somehow inadequate here.



Still, the games and—more important—the broadcasts go on. There is sponsorship money and there is television revenue, even when the stadiums are half empty. Probably because TV viewers know that at least some of the games will offer more surprises and twists than anything else they could find to watch. There are only so many *Law & Order* reruns you can watch, and, who knows, maybe you will luck

into Appalachian State's exciting victory over Toledo in the Camellia Bowl.

When college football is good, it is an emotional feast. You find yourself transported into a state of some kind of emotional bliss even as the rational side of your brain may scoff. After all, there are the cheerleaders, the bands, the screaming fans, the mascots. (And, by the way, did you see the Florida State horse, Renegade, take a fall before kickoff in the Orange Bowl? Fortunately, both horse and rider were okay, and the warrior's spear was planted on the 50-yard line according to ritual.) It all seems so gloriously pointless, but still, when you hear the first notes of your school's fight song and see the players come through the tunnel in their colors, the atavistic synapses fire, the old tribal instincts surge, and for a couple of hours, you are transported.

With so many bowl games, there were bound to be stinkers and yawners. But there were also some gems, even with teams that had been only marginally successful during the regular season. Stanford, for instance, edged (as they say) North Carolina in the Hyundai Sun Bowl, 25-23. Interestingly, Stanford's star running back Christian McCaffrey did not play. He chose not to risk an injury that might have damaged his standing in the upcoming NFL draft. So the game, like all of them, depended to a very large degree on players who are not in it for the money. Not the *big* money, anyway.

Another notable star who chose not to play in his team's bowl game was Leonard Fournette of LSU, who had been, like McCaffrey, a Heisman Trophy candidate. Fournette's teammates got along fine without him in the Citrus Bowl and beat Louisville and its quarterback, Lamar Jackson, who did, in fact, win the Heisman.

If the bowl games proved nothing else, they did establish that football is a team sport.

Those games were all a prelude to the big New Year's Eve show-downs, the Peach Bowl and the Fiesta Bowl, which serve as semifinals in the ad-hoc playoff system to determine

the national champion. The winners will meet on January 9 and play for the right to say “We’re number one.”

This is a matter of inestimable importance to many fans. It has also been a matter of enormous controversy over the years. The best college football could do was to rely on newspaper polls, which led to a lot of arguments. Who made the hacks at the AP kings or gods? Eventually the computer was brought in to ameliorate the “human element,” which, however, was still present. This arrangement was known as the Bowl Championship Series (1998-2013), and may have caused even more arguments, until it was superseded two years ago by the College Football Playoff—essentially, a selection committee (membership includes Condoleezza Rice) with a duty to:

- Rank the top 25 teams and assign the top 4 to semifinal sites;
- Assign teams to New Year’s bowls;
- Create competitive matchups;
- Attempt to avoid rematches of regular-season games and repeat appearances in specific bowls;
- Consider geography.

This season, the committee determined that the four playoff teams would be Alabama, Clemson, Ohio State, and Washington. There were arguments. Of course there were. Why did Ohio State, for instance, get chosen over Penn State, which had won when the two played each other and also finished first in their conference, the Big Ten? Well, Penn State had lost two games, and Ohio State only the one. This was typical of the arguments that fans have pressed with trial-lawyer intensity.

Well, anyway, the finalists were set and no argument would change that. Alabama and Washington would play in Atlanta in the Peach Bowl and for the longtime fan and student of the college game, there was a strong element of nostalgia in this matchup. Those schools had played each other in the 1926 Rose Bowl, in a game that was the genesis of the Alabama football tradition.

The Rose Bowl was already an institution by then, and its sponsors would invite two teams to play—one from the

west coast, the other from the east. The winner could claim to be the best in the land. At the end of the 1926 regular season, the committee asked Dartmouth to come out and play Washington. The invitation was declined. Feelers went out to Princeton and others, but they were politely turned down. Alabama was, finally, invited as, literally, a poor substitute. In those days, the South was still institutionally poor, backward, and barefoot.

But the Alabama team had gone undefeated, and it welcomed the chance to prove it could play anyone. The fans believed in their team with a fervor that went beyond just football.

When you have to field teams in 41 bowl games, you take what you can get including, even, a couple of teams with losing records. The word ‘glut’ seems somehow inadequate here.

This was about pride and it touched, inevitably, on the Lost Cause. The team traveled four days and 2,000 miles, by train, getting off to run wind sprints at stops along the way, arriving finally in Pasadena not merely as underdogs but also as the country hicks. They won. The final score was 20-19, and that single point marked the advent of Alabama football.

The team that was the underdog in 1926 is today the despised top dog in college football. So they went to Atlanta—a three-hour drive instead of a four-day train ride—played Washington in the Peach Bowl and won easily. For all the committee’s work and the media buildup, it wasn’t much of a game. The final was 24-7, and it was less exciting than that to watch.

But there was still the Fiesta Bowl left and hope that Clemson and Ohio State might put on a show. They had been named semifinalists, after all, by that committee. Clemson blew Ohio State out of the stadium, 31-0. The system had, so far, failed. And the next

day, there would be only those black-eyed peas to look forward to.

But still, on January 2, there would be three more games, including the Rose Bowl. This seemed oddly anticlimactic, following the tournament semifinals with a lineup of what, to many fans, were nothing more than exhibition games. But if you love college football, you will always watch the Rose Bowl which, as the announcers regularly remind us, is the “granddaddy of them all.” The game this year would be between Penn State and Southern Cal: two teams that had wandered in the wilderness of scandal and were on the path to redemption, playing in college football’s most hallowed game. (USC’s first Rose Bowl victory, in 1923, had been against Penn State.) So even without the black-eyed peas, I settled in to watch. Maybe this game would redeem a month of too much inferior football.

And it was a classic. Penn State fell behind early by two touchdowns, and if this had been the NFL, you might have been looking for another game on another channel. But Penn State rallied and was behind by only 27-21 at the half before breaking loose for 28 points in the third quarter. Then, USC—down 49-35—mounted its comeback, scoring two touchdowns and a field goal to win. Final score, 52-49. It was one of those games that leave the fan feeling depleted and spent.

There had been no national championship at stake. Or anything else, really. But that wasn’t the point. And you might say that there really *wasn’t* any point. They played to win and they played all-out. For the fan, that is what counts, and the bowl games still come through, just often enough. A columnist for the *New York Daily News* wrote that it was “a truly incredible Rose Bowl from start to finish. For a totally meaningless game, that is.”

The man doesn’t get it and should look for other work.

As of this writing, it now remains only for Alabama and Clemson to settle things in Tampa on January 9. These same teams played last year for the national championship and Alabama won a thriller. Kickoff is at 8:30 P.M.

Too late, sadly, for black-eyed peas. ♦

Trump's Nuclear Tweets

What are the facts?

BY ROBERT JOSEPH & ERIC EDELMAN



Russian strategic ballistic missiles in the Victory Day Parade in Moscow, May 9, 2015

Of President-elect Trump's tweets since winning the election, the one drawing the greatest criticism may well be his comment last week that the United States "must strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes." The next day, his critics went downright ballistic when the president-elect reportedly made the off-camera statement: "Let it be an arms race. . . . We will outmatch them at every pass and outlast them all." The partisans at the Ploughshares Fund and their paid-for "echo-chamber" colleagues across the disarmament community were seething that Trump's

Robert Joseph was undersecretary of state for arms control and international security from 2005-2007; Eric Edelman was undersecretary of defense for policy, 2005-2009.

comments could touch off an arms race and undercut strategic stability, lowering the threshold for nuclear use, possibly leading to a global holocaust. But beyond the obvious hyperbole, what are the relevant facts?

Fact one: The nuclear arms race has been going on for more than a decade, but it has been primarily a one-nation race, by Russia—unless you count China, which has been aggressively modernizing its nuclear arsenal as well. Moscow has strengthened and expanded its nuclear capability across the board. It has maintained a broad array of warfighting systems, from nuclear-armed torpedoes to short- and medium-range missiles, including the development of new capabilities that violate the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. At the strategic level, Russia has modernized all three legs of its triad. It has deployed,

or soon will, new mobile and heavy ICBMs as well as a new class of strategic ballistic missile submarines. It has begun testing a rail-mobile ICBM, raising the prospect that it will bring back an operational concept most thought had been abandoned with the end of the Cold War. It is modernizing the air-breathing force with new cruise missiles (already tested over Syria multiple times) and an advanced heavy bomber. Moreover, Russia is developing, and may have tested, an unprecedented new nuclear weapon—a nuclear-powered torpedo with an enormously large warhead, perhaps as large as 100 megatons, whose sole purpose would be to inflict massive civilian casualties and long-term ecological damage.

Fact two: Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has reduced the size of its nuclear forces with each successive administration. Under presidents George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush, U.S. nuclear forces were substantially reduced. Thousands of theater, so-called non-strategic, nuclear weapons were dismantled, representing an estimated 90 to 95 percent of the stockpile that once was a principal means of deterring Soviet aggression against NATO allies. Today, Russia has an estimated 10-to-1 advantage in this category of deterrent forces.

To its credit, the Obama administration initiated overdue strategic nuclear modernization programs to develop and deploy both a replacement for the *Ohio*-class submarine and a new strategic bomber, perhaps armed with a modern long-range standoff missile. It appears that the United States will also pursue a new ICBM force to replace the aging Minuteman land-based missiles. Yet this modernization of delivery platforms is being pursued consistent with White House guidance that no new nuclear capabilities be developed—a unilateral restriction that does not apply to Russia, China, North Korea, Pakistan, India, or even our French and U.K. treaty allies.

The U.S. nuclear weapons infrastructure has suffered from decades of neglect that is only now being partially addressed and again with the

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restriction that no new capabilities will be designed or developed.

Fact three: There have been significant consequences resulting from the above disparity in the development and fielding of nuclear forces—a disparity that stems from more than 20 years of neglect and, for the last 8 years, unilateral nuclear disarmament in this administration’s feckless quest for a world without nuclear weapons. Although President Obama has talked about getting Russia to negotiate reductions in theater nuclear forces, his administration unilaterally acted to eliminate all sea-launched cruise missiles—an important capability for our Pacific allies, especially Japan, who rely on U.S. extended deterrence guarantees for their security. While the administration did negotiate New START with Russia, the treaty required reductions of deployed strategic warheads only on the part of the United States. As we predicted when we testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the treaty’s implications in 2010, the Russian warhead level has actually gone up under the treaty. In other words, this has been a clear case of unilateral disarmament cloaked in bilateral garb.

Today, Russia has overtaken the United States in the number of deployed nuclear forces. At the theater level, according to administration sources, the U.S. arsenal consists of a few hundred gravity bombs while the Russian force numbers about 4,000 warheads. At the strategic level, the most recent data provided under New START show the U.S. force level below 1,400 and Russia’s close to 1,800 in deployed strategic warheads. Little wonder that Russian officials claim to have achieved strategic superiority and presumably believe they will have escalation dominance in a crisis with the United States. The Obama administration recognized in the 2010 Nuclear Posture Review that these kinds of numerical disparities could undermine strategic stability, noting that

the need for strict numerical parity between the two countries is no longer as compelling as it was during the Cold War. But large

disparities in nuclear capabilities could raise concerns on both sides and among U.S. allies and partners, and may not be conducive to maintaining a stable, long-term strategic relationship, especially as nuclear forces are significantly reduced.

It is in this context that changes in Russian nuclear warfighting doctrine can best be understood. Granting the U.S. superiority in conventional forces, Russian doctrinal writings appear to conclude that—through a combination of unconventional forces, information operations (including electronic warfare and cyber), and nuclear threats—Russia can exercise what its officials

Trump’s comments are a clear repudiation of the pursuit of unilateral disarmament by the Obama administration and signal a return to decades of U.S. policy under both Democratic and Republican presidents.

call “cross-domain coercion” and prevail in a conventional conflict. But if it cannot, the doctrine suggests Russia has every intention of escalating to nuclear use to win any conflict.

Russia’s perceived sense of nuclear superiority has also led to a growing number of increasingly bold nuclear threats to U.S. allies primarily over missile defenses. Denmark, Norway, Poland, Romania, and others have been subjected to this form of political coercion in the past several years. Moscow’s willingness to threaten nuclear use may be related to more than nuclear force levels. Russia’s decisions to invade Ukraine, annex Crimea, and intervene militarily in Syria may also be linked to Vladimir Putin’s sensing a lack of resolve on the part of the United States. Whether it was the failure to enforce the chemical weapons red line in Syria, or the failure to provide lethal defensive weapons to Ukraine, or the precipitous withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq, or some other display of weakness, it is clear that Putin has

seen President Obama as weak. And for Putin, a man who thinks and acts in power terms and abhors weakness, this has been an opportunity to restore Russia’s status as a great power and assert its dominance against its neighbors and beyond.

Fact four: President-elect Trump’s comments on U.S. nuclear forces are a clear repudiation of the pursuit of unilateral disarmament by the Obama administration. Trump’s statements signal a return to many decades of U.S. policy under both Democratic and Republican presidents. It was President Kennedy who said it most succinctly—the U.S. nuclear arsenal should and will be “second to none.” The reason is clear: An imbalance in nuclear forces is inherently destabilizing and can more easily lead to crisis, miscalculation, and conflict. Stability through the demonstration of strength is essential for deterrence success and the best means to dissuade Moscow from further aggression.

There is an interesting parallel between the present circumstances and those that existed when President Reagan took office in January 1981. Following another president considered weak by Soviet leaders, Reagan charted a course based on the long-standing proposition that peace is best protected through strength, not weakness. Reagan did hope for a future in which all nuclear weapons would be eliminated, something that today’s disarmament advocates are fond of citing. But these same advocates ignore the fact that Reagan understood that deterrence was based on a demonstration of resolve and the possession of unmatched capabilities. As a consequence, he embarked on the largest offensive nuclear modernization in U.S. history, along with the development of strategic defenses. While many in the disarmament community criticized Reagan at the time for engaging in an arms race, his policies and actions contributed significantly to the end of the Soviet Union. One can hope that Putin understands this lesson and will recognize that the robust nuclear modernization America needs heralds a real change in the White House. ♦

Barack to the Future

His gift to posterity: marching orders

BY CHRISTOPHER CALDWELL

They are keening in the Bay Area. “Oh, America, what have we done?” wrote a San Bruno reader to the *San Francisco Chronicle* the week after November’s election. “Many of us feel for President Obama, especially as we watch him gracefully support Donald Trump’s transition, knowing Trump’s priorities include destroying Obama’s legacy.”

About half the country did not wish to see Donald Trump elected president. To judge from the papers, though, their chief regret is not that Barack Obama governed in such a way as to help deliver the White House to Trump. No! What eats at them is that Americans voted in such a way as to unsettle President Obama’s peace of mind, or his self-esteem, or whatever it is we mean when we talk, as we increasingly do, of the president’s “legacy.”

That is how President Obama sees it, too. “If you want to give Michelle and me a good send-off, . . . if you care about our legacy, realize that everything we stand for is at stake,” he told the guests at a Congressional Black Caucus dinner in mid-September. “I will consider it a personal insult, an insult to *my* legacy, if this community lets down its guard.” Journalists have picked up this way of thinking. The week before Christmas, Coral Davenport of the *New York Times* wrote:

President Obama announced on Tuesday what he called a permanent ban on offshore oil and gas drilling along wide areas of the Arctic and the Atlantic Seaboard as he tried to nail down an environmental legacy that cannot quickly be reversed by Donald J. Trump.

In the United States at least, this is a new way of looking at politics. Do Americans need to be told it is a dangerous one? Policy outcomes in a democratic republic are not

supposed to be things you can “nail down” so firmly that democracy cannot dislodge them.

According to Google’s Ngram database, which tallies word appearances in books, the word “legacy” appeared until recently to be dying. It comes, through medieval Latin, from a word describing territory left in the hands of a Roman *legatus* (an imperial representative). A near-synonym for bequest, it has historically been attributed to the inheritor as much as to the bequeather. (In this sense, Obamacare and the “Iran deal” on nuclear weapons are, for better or for worse, *our* legacies, not Obama’s.)

To talk of “legacies” smacks of royalism and hierarchy. By the end of 1945, the word had hit rock-bottom, appearing in print only about half as frequently as it had in the 19th century. But since the war, it has had an extraordinary resurgence. Its usage has quadrupled. The word is more common than it has ever been. It might seem paradoxical that it should be the baby boom generation that presided over its revival. A generation that, starting in the 1960s, refused categorically to be bound by the political habits and customs of its ancestors now finds it natural to demand that the political arrangements

it leaves its descendants be set in stone. Double standards are baked into the word itself. While the noun “legacy” has been used to place a halo of inviolability around what used to be ephemeral policy choices, the adjective “legacy” has come to signal “institutions you don’t have to respect because they were invented before the Internet.” When we talk about “legacy media,” we mean newspapers like the *New York Times* and magazines like this one.

The vogue for legacies is part of a larger philosophical shift. Politicians have acquired “legacies” at the same pace that personalities and events have stopped being “famous” and started being “iconic”—an adjective used 20 times as frequently today as it was at the end of World War II. We have moved from engaged admiration to passive adoration. It’s lucky we are close to the “end of history” and that the



Protesters in Monticello, Utah, demonstrate on December 29 against President Obama’s designation of the new Bears Ears National Monument, covering more than a million acres of land.

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world of the future is, if not knowable, then at least modelable. Recently, Tom Farley, president of the New York Stock Exchange, unironically praised Goldman Sachs's new chief financial officer for "his ability to take decisive action based on what the world will look like in 5 to 10 years."

This kind of prediction looks like hubris. It is perhaps less so in the case of President Obama and his "legacy." Part of his historical significance is easily predictable. He is America's first black president. This means more than the answer to a 22nd-century trivia question. In the minds of many Americans, he has been given the role of redeeming black suffering and absolving white guilt. We do not know whether this mission is compatible with America as it has been understood historically, constitutionally, and emotionally, or whether a black presidency can become a normal thing, and a lot rides on the answer to whether it can. For those who wish President Obama well there is a sacramental dimension to everything he does. They talk about being "on the side of history," which is something no human being can know.

Opinion leaders tend to treat all questions about Obama as having been answered—in the affirmative—before they are even asked. The campaign slogan "Yes we can!" played to this tendency. The decision of the Nobel committee to confer its peace prize on Obama just eight months into his presidency took it to preposterous lengths. But Obama's role placed him in a hall of mirrors, and all Americans were confused about him inside their own heads. Americans desperately wanted to approve of Obama, and thus desperately wanted to interpret his behavior as meriting their approval. In 2014, Obama appeared on the Internet comedy show *Between Two Ferns*, where the schlub-humorist Zach Galifianakis asked him: "What is it like to be the last black president?" That question opened up an abyss. It was a terrifying moment. Seldom has it been mentioned since. It may have been inevitable that Obama's presidency would turn into an era of taboo.

And this was a problem, because Obama is, in important respects that have nothing directly to do with race, an outlier to the American political tradition—the sort of leader that democratic constitutions are designed to thwart. He is less punctilious about constitutional forms than any president since Franklin Roosevelt. This was not so evident a failing in the early days of his presidency. Then he was carrying out his electoral mandate to unravel George W. Bush's wars (for which his commander-in-chief authority largely sufficed) and acting to defuse the finance crisis (for which FDR provided, if you will, a precedent of

doing the unprecedented). Later, in more normal times, his style would come to appear to a lot of Americans as autocratic and arbitrary.

His chief legislative achievements—his stimulus package and his health care reform—date from the early months of his administration. There was a malevolent kind of genius in the way the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) used regulation to gut the employer-based model that provided the world's best health care to 85 percent of the population in order to help about a quarter of those who had been uninsured. The most closely studied legislation of this generation, Obamacare was already unpopular when it passed, and its unpopularity has only increased with its implementation.

Obama's antidemocratic instincts came out in many ways. He ruled by executive order, and even sought to regularize the status of millions of illegal immigrants using his "prosecutorial discretion," a move for which

his supporters claimed the Emancipation Proclamation as a precedent. He was the first president to understand the Supreme Court as a means by which the democratic parts of the constitution could be actively bypassed. No one would say that *Brown v. Board of Education* was one of the great achievements of the Eisenhower administration

or that *Roe v. Wade* was a blot on Richard Nixon's otherwise skillful handling of domestic policy. The gay marriage cases under Obama (*Hollingsworth*, *Windsor*, and *Obergefell*) were different. He was not merely a witness but a field marshal of the litigative strategy that culminated in the Supreme Court's removal of America's marriage laws from democratic scrutiny. As he told *Rolling Stone* editor Jann Wenner the day after November's elections, he had been plotting this strategy even as he campaigned as a champion of traditional marriage:

WENNER: You got up there and said legalize same-sex marriage, and you pushed it right over the edge . . .

OBAMA: Well, you know, no . . . If you will recall, what happened was, first, very systematically, I changed laws around hospital visitation for people who were same-sex partners. I then assigned the Pentagon to do a study on getting rid of "don't ask, don't tell," which then got the buy-in of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and we were then able to [repeal] "don't ask, don't tell." We then filed a brief on Proposition 8 out in California. And then, after a lot of groundwork was laid, then I took a position.

Obama's discomfort with democracy was not limited to preferring courts and bureaucracies to votes. It was a kind of disposition. His defenders would say it blossomed under Republican intransigence, but there is no doubting the

Obama is an outlier to the American political tradition—the sort of leader that democratic constitutions are designed to thwart.

disposition. He declined to submit to the Senate for ratification the treaty (which he called a “deal”) allowing Iran a path to nuclear weapons. Or the Paris climate-change agreement made with China.

He managed, with the help of some ingenious bureaucrats and lawyers, partially to liberate the presidency from Congress’s control of the budget. His government collected tens of billions of dollars in fines (“settlements”), mostly from investment banks, redeployable by the administration—and nothing in this whole vast rap sheet of alleged white-collar crime produced a single allegation for which a major banker was sent to jail. He founded a financial watchdog agency that would be funded by the Federal Reserve, not Congress. He turned corporations subject to Justice Department antitrust scrutiny—Walmart being the glaring example—into the enforcers of administration preferences in state government. By 2015, Walmart was intimidating state lawmakers in Indiana, North Carolina, and Arkansas. There was always a lot of invisible power being wielded in the Obama administration, and the more invisible, the better: After Democrats were routed in the 2014 election, Obama claimed to have “heard” the voices of the two-thirds of people who *didn’t* vote.



Opponents of the nuclear deal with Iran await Joe Biden, September 3, 2015.

Obama believed in elections, but in a strange way—as winner-take-all affairs. Once the victor in a presidential election was declared, there was no need to sound the people (or their representatives) until the next time round. This was a matter of principle for him: He treated the result of 2008 as if it gave him *carte blanche*, and there has been nothing inconsistent about his reaction to Donald Trump’s victory after November. “The people have spoken,” he told a press conference in mid-November. “Donald Trump will be the next president, the 45th president of the United States. . . . Those who didn’t vote for him have to recognize that that’s how democracy works, that’s how this system operates.”

Obama’s antidemocratic instincts in power had an extraordinary effect on the conservative part of the electorate. He turned conservatism into a democracy movement. That is why resistance to Obama, when it came—and it came early—took the form not of a Reaganite small-government uprising but of a pro-Constitution movement, the Tea Party, that in fact had strong anti-Reaganite tendencies. The whole of the Democratic party, unsurprisingly,

blocked their ears to what the Tea Party was saying, but so did half the Republican party. They were thus flabbergasted when Donald Trump won the presidency at the head of the American equivalent of what, in the old days of democracy promotion, used to be called a “color revolution.”

Obama’s legacy is Trump—who ran to save the country from what Obama represented. Trump’s election means those policies that rested only on Obama’s say-so will likely die with the outgoing administration. Nor is it certain that Obamacare will be as hard to dismantle as Washington opinion would have us believe. True, federal programs—especially benefits programs—develop constituencies that fight for them. But from a Machiavellian perspective, this way of viewing things may be anachronistic and wrong. In the current polarized, one could almost say tribalized, state of our party system, gutting such programs might *help* a party by showing the other party’s voters that their leaders cannot defend them.

In the long term, Obama’s presidency may be seen as more a symptom of something than a cause of anything. He prospered in an age of debt and “off-balance-sheet liabilities,” and his presidency will be understood in this larger context. The habit of mind that leads us to talk about “legacy” is the same one that has caused us to accept the loading of debt on our children and grandchildren. Since 1980 we have

assumed that it is possible—even ethical—to bind future generations to carry out our generation’s budgeting priorities, much as the proclaimers of “legacies” believe it is possible to bind future generations to our generation’s faddish ways of looking at history and society.

Thomas Jefferson saw it differently. In a letter to James Madison in 1789 he wrote:

I set out on this ground, which I suppose to be self evident, “that the earth belongs in usufruct to the living”; that the dead have neither powers nor rights over it. . . . Then no man can by natural right oblige the lands he occupied, or the persons who succeed him in that occupation, to the payment of debts contracted by him. For if he could, he might during his own life, eat up the usufruct of the lands for several generations to come, and then the lands would belong to the dead, and not to the living.

Is that what is meant by “legacies”? If so, they are a component of the servile alternative to self-rule the country has lately been offered. They will merit attention in any intellectual housecleaning to come. ♦

JOE RAEDLE / GETTY

Protecting Palestine

Israel's unacknowledged role on the West Bank

BY REUEL MARC GERECHT

Not long ago, I was talking to a Fatah official about Palestinian aspirations, especially his party's sharp emotions about Hamas, the Palestinian fundamentalist movement that rules Gaza and would gladly overthrow the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority on the West Bank. Fear, loathing, secular outrage (which may have been amplified to please Western ears), and a certain sadness about unrequited Palestinian fraternity in the face of Israeli oppression punctuated our conversation. When I finally tired of his urgent demand that America rectify Israeli transgressions or see violence rip the West Bank, I asked him how long he thought the Palestinian Authority could survive if Israel yanked its support to Fatah's security apparatus. I suggested one month. He remonstrated: "We could probably last two."

What has been lost, again, in Barack Obama's final venting against Israel through his abstention in the United Nations Security Council resolution against all Israeli settlements on the West Bank and Jewish homes in East Jerusalem is how disconnected American foreign policy on this imbroglio has been from the larger issues riling the Middle East. The truth about Fatah's security weaknesses is symptomatic of the truth about the Palestinians: They can exist as a non-Islamist polity only if Israel protects their attenuated nation-state. If the Jews pull back, then the militant Muslim faithful will probably recast the Palestinian identity, wiping away the secular Palestinian elite who have defined the Palestinian cause among Westerners since the Israelis and the Palestine Liberation

Organization first started sparring with each other in 1964.

The Israelis have granted the West Bank Palestinians the opportunity to take a pass on the ongoing implosion of the Muslim Arab world. That pass also extends, with fewer guarantees, to the Hashemite monarchy in Jordan, which could have a much harder time surviving with a triumphant Hamas on its border. We assume that East Bank Palestinians prefer Abdullah II, with his Palestinian wife, to fundamentalists from either bank. That might be wrong.

The Israeli pass may be conditional. It depends on whether Jerusalem wants to continue investing the

manpower and wealth and absorbing the intensifying animadversions, ostracism, and harassing lawsuits over their "occupation" of Palestinian lands: the very occupation that has allowed the Palestinian Authority and the PLO vision of a nation-state to survive. Mahmoud Abbas, the 81-year-old PLO chairman and head of the Palestinian Authority, loves to castigate Israel for denying his people nationhood. But it's Israel's stubborn refusal to make the territorial concessions that President

Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry dream of that has prevented the inevitable diminution of Israel's security prerogatives on the West Bank—the ones that keep Abbas and the Fatah clique in power.

Fatah's men actually exist in the best of possible worlds: They enjoy undisputed mastery of Palestinian politics on the West Bank; they have established a perpetuating oligarchy; foreigners pay for their dominion; the Israelis rarely take credit for maintaining Fatah's supremacy (which would further vitiate the group's legitimacy), while the Palestinian Authority can lambaste the Israelis for a wide variety of sins, most surreally blaming the Jewish state for the inability of the Palestinian people to come together. Abbas's men can unofficially condone, if not encourage, low-level violence against Israelis; through



Deadly fighting between Hamas and Fatah partisans in Gaza, June 13, 2007

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credit by association, Palestinians' knifing Israelis helps Fatah stay competitive with the Islamists. Even if violence worsened, the Israelis probably wouldn't stop protecting Hamas's principal foe, the only instrument Jerusalem has for keeping Islamic militancy at bay without deploying far more of the Israeli Defense Forces.

Israelis who deal with Palestinians intimately have no illusions about Fatah's staying power if the Jewish state's protective umbrella were removed. They have no illusions how much damage one man could do with a medium-weight, long-range mortar—and a Palestinian wouldn't even have to target the Ben Gurion International Airport to wreak havoc—if Israel didn't have total control over the West Bank's highlands.

Israel and the United States have invested heavily in creating the biggest institution in the Palestinian Authority: Fatah's police, internal-security, and paramilitary services. Americans, especially Americans who are fearful of Muslims voting, usually like to focus on "institution-building" as an alternative to supporting the "premature" development of democracy in Islamic lands. The United States, with the Central Intelligence Agency in the lead, has probably invested tens of millions of dollars, perhaps hundreds of millions of dollars, in Fatah's security services. In 2007, when Hamas dethroned Fatah in Gaza following the failure of the two organizations to resolve their differences after Hamas triumphed in 2005's free parliamentary elections, the Islamists' smaller paramilitary force quickly overran Fatah security units operated by the whiskey-loving Muhammad Dahlan, a native of Gaza, who had an extensive intelligence and brutal security network running through the Strip. Dahlan had been a CIA favorite (he likely is still close to Langley). It's a good guess that the clandestine service's upper echelons in the Near East Division, like many in the Israeli security and intelligence services, would have bet that Dahlan had the upper hand on the Islamists—until it became obvious that Fatah's forces lacked leadership and spirit. Fatah's security personnel often look the part—the sunglasses, expensive Swiss watches, and dark German cars—and they certainly know how to torture their enemies. But they, like so much of the Palestinian elite who now live off international aid, have turned into fearful bourgeois who know the other side is hungrier, meaner, and uncompromised. However corrupt Hamas's senior officials may have become in Gaza, and they

If Israel were to stop protecting the attenuated nation-state on the West Bank, then the militant Muslim faithful would probably wipe away the secular Palestinian elite who have defined the Palestinian cause among Westerners since the Israelis and the Palestine Liberation Organization first started sparring with each other in 1964.

might be very corrupt, the organization does a vastly better job of hiding its acquisitiveness; its deeply religious, anti-Zionist mission remains real and crystal clear.

Fatah's men have become noticeably distressed by the increasingly overt anti-Iranian alliance between Israel and the Sunni Gulf states. That alliance is undoubtedly limited: Saudi Arabia, a deeply conservative Islamic state that sees itself as the guardian of the faith, isn't going to cooperate too openly with Israel against Iran, let alone officially recognize the Jewish state, which remains in the kingdom's Wahhabi creed an insult to Muslim suprem-

acy—to God's dominion—in the Middle East. Riyadh's royalty can be energetically hypocritical and pragmatic, but there are always religious reins on their behavior. For the secular Fatah elite, however, the second Gulf war and the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Great Arab Revolt and the tidal wave of violence that has come in its wake, and the rise of Iran and its Arab Shiite militias have been an unmitigated disaster, since these events have demolished the centripetal eminence of the Palestinian cause among Arab Sunnis, especially in the Persian Gulf.

My senior Fatah official, annoyed by questions on the Syrian conflict, perhaps a more momentous cataclysm than the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, came close to yelling, "Look at us!" Caught in a dream-scape, President Obama and his secretary of state *are* still gazing. Devoted both to left-wing politics, where a pro-Palestinian disposition has become almost de rigueur, and Washington's peace-process obsession, they have retreated from the Middle Eastern chaos to the safe zone of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They may well believe they are doing the Jewish state an enormous favor by saving its liberal democracy from, as Obama's former coordinator on the Middle East, Philip Gordon, recently put it in the *New York Times*, everything from "European boycotts to prosecutions by the International Criminal Court to the loss of support from American Jews uncomfortable with the prospect of perpetual Israeli rule over millions of disenfranchised Arabs." Obama, Kerry, and Gordon, who blessed the American withdrawal from Iraq and watched hell descend on Syria, talk about Israel and the Arab world as if the Arab state system, dominated by secular dictators, wasn't cracking up, leaving hundreds of thousands dead, millions displaced, great urban centers in ruin or decay, and Sunni and Shiite Islamists as the primary force reimaging the Middle East.

The historical and strategic parochialism of the Obama administration has been breathtaking. As for liberal American Jews, whose potential for idealistic infatuations should never be underestimated, they have never shown an overwhelming interest in the possibilities of self-determination among Muslims. Jewish Americans who travel to Israel, who have some recollection of what Israel was and what it has become, may, just possibly, realize the country has become much more liberal, prosperous, democratic, and free as it has “ruled” over the West Bank. This has occurred despite the more prominent role of the Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox on the Israeli right. (As in the United States, social conservatives in Israel are probably doomed to fight a rearguard action against the West’s most sacred creed: individualism.) It may not have occurred to J-Street Americans, who are so uncomfortable with the aftermath of the ’67 war, but the *only* reason Fatah hasn’t created a more vicious police state—that is, created a typical Arab polity—is that Israel is right next door, checking the inclinations of the Fatah leadership, except when it comes to Hamas. The Labor party, the vehicle of Israel’s socialist, less free, poorer, and far more boring past, to which many American liberals and Europeans remain so attached, has exhausted itself for many reasons. But chief among the causes of decline is that its hopeful vision of Israelis and Palestinians became too disconnected from reality. A pragmatic people, Israelis have, for the most part, moved on. Few Israeli soldiers and internal-security officers probably enjoy their time riding shotgun in their sectors of the West Bank, but civil disobedience about such service isn’t an issue in the country because the Palestinians have given Israeli leftists so little hope.

Part of the American left and some Europeans may not be able to move on. They might not see beyond their anti-imperialist imperative—the revulsion for Westerners who dominate Third Worlders—to the underlying facts: that Fatah has always been on the cutting-edge of “disfranchising” Palestinians; that the Fatah-Hamas struggle is a microcosm of the conflicts tearing the Arab world apart; and that Israel’s presence on the West Bank, however offensive it may be to Muslim sensibilities and pride, is the only power that has given some stability, structure, economic vitality, and flashes of free speech to Palestinians.

Future relations between Europe and Israel are likely to differ, however. Most Europeans don’t really care all that much about Palestine; it’s always been for many a feel-good endeavor, a cost-free means for Europeans, especially on the left, to align themselves with a Third World (anti-American) cause and to express dissatisfaction with a muscular little state that uses too much force too often. Israel is very much a European state of the 19th century: an ethnicity fused with a religion, prideful of its identity,

national ambitions, and military. It is, as the French Marxist orientalist Maxime Rodinson first piquantly put it, “a colonial-settler state”—as are all the culturally European offshoots of Mother England. Zionism reminds many 21st-century Europeans, especially Europe’s post-national elite, of a troublesome past filled with minority problems and bigotry.

But Europe’s problems now are enormous. Not even the perfervid leftist writers of *Le Monde diplomatique* see the Muslim refugee waves and Islamic terrorism targeting Europe as Israel’s fault. Once upon a time, Washington, London, and Paris all looked at the peace process essentially the same way: The Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the core destabilizing issue in the Arab Middle East. Even the most dogged historian couldn’t catalogue all the American and European intelligence and diplomatic cables and papers over the last 40 years stressing the urgent strategic importance of solving the Israeli-Palestinian question.

No one serious thinks that way now, not even Obama. Many of the same folks who used to stress the strategic importance of the Israeli-Palestinian/Israeli-Arab clash have effortlessly shifted to a different gravamen: A solution must be found to this conflict to save Israeli democracy and bring “justice” and “dignity” to the Palestinians. But the odds of such a quixotic campaign overriding the reality of the collapse of the secular Arab state system, even in Europe, aren’t high. The Palestinian issue has risen in prominence under Obama not because it strategically merits our renewed attention but because the president has willed it. The Europeans, especially the French, have recently highlighted the imbroglio because that is what the French do, especially in the case of a socialist government that has become dependent upon the French Muslim vote, when it’s clear that is what Washington *wants* them to do. As a senior French official recently put it to me, if Paris had gotten Obama to engage forcefully on Syria, the Israeli-Palestinian issue likely would never have surfaced at the United Nations Security Council. Obama encouraged the French, British, and Egyptians to wander. And yet the Russians, the world’s premier troublemakers, have remained pretty indifferent to the Palestinian cause. Did Vladimir Putin vote against Israeli settlements in the U.N. Security Council? Yes. Has he unleashed the vast Russian propaganda machine against Israel in favor of the Palestinians, echoing the propaganda that Putin grew up with in the KGB? No. Has Putin even tried to make the Palestinians feel good? Fatah officials give the impression that the Russians have forgotten who they are. The Russians have replaced the Americans as the preeminent foreign power of the northern Middle East. Israelis and Russians see and speak to each other all the time. They do so mostly to ensure that they don’t shoot at each

other as they fly over Syria, in the Israeli case sometimes to kill the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iranian Revolutionary Guards, both allies of Russia in the Syrian conflict. Hard power is the coin of the realm in the Middle East. Putin takes the Israelis seriously, far more than he does the U.N. Security Council.

Only in the American academe, the weakest player in Washington's foreign-policy debates, can one find folks who are as enamored of this issue as is the president. Whether Obama actually thought in 2008 he could deliver to the Palestinians a state during his tenure, we don't know. The president's sense of himself suggests it's possible. His failure appears to have made him splenetic. If President Trump decides to push back on this issue, however, the Europeans are unlikely to follow Obama's lead and double down. Obama's abstention at the U.N. could prove to be the last gasp of this ancien régime. Damage has been done that cannot be undone, especially concerning the "lawfare" that may be waged against Israelis by enterprising Palestinians and sympathetic European leftists. But this is, at worst, a sideshow. The decisive factor in this largely intra-Western theater remains American leadership. If Donald Trump announced that he was establishing an American team to review the bang-versus-buck value of the United Nations, co-chaired by Mitt Romney and John Bolton, it would send a big shiver throughout the entire bureaucracy and the foreign diplomatic staffs. There is a good argument for Washington to fund a global podium where weaker nations get to vent their displeasure with the United States, but it's always healthy to remind the "international community" who is paying for the therapy.

If Donald Trump challenges the bipartisan illusions about the two-state solution and the peace process, his disruptive inclinations might improve the fortunes of both Israelis and Palestinians, who are going to live with each other intimately and painfully no matter what happens. Moving the U.S. embassy from its beachfront perch in Tel Aviv to Jerusalem should have happened decades ago. It's a 34-mile journey that would help everyone focus on the Middle East instead of this Westernized sliver of the Mediterranean littoral. The Palestinians are never going to control or "share sovereignty" in East Jerusalem. This

is the most fundamental truth that embassies in Tel Aviv try to deny. As a byproduct, consulates in East Jerusalem usually become hotbeds of sincere Palestinian sympathy that aligns fairly closely to Fatah talking points.

Israelis could try to do more for their Arab neighbors: They could take on the thankless task of ensuring that Palestinians under Fatah's dominion are less abused, that the ruling West Bank elite are a little less corrupt, and that Israeli-Palestinian business ventures are encouraged, especially if they can reward Palestinians who aren't Fatah favorites. Certainly more Jews beyond Jerusalem and the big settlement communities that follow the Green Line make no security sense. If Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump's apparent intellectual alignment on the

propriety of big Green Line settlements were to extend deeper into the West Bank, that would be cause for concern that the Israeli right is undertaking a biblical voyage without relevance to the modern Middle East.

The Jewish state has no choice but to play the long game—to plan for intrusive Israeli surveillance of the West Bank for at least another 50 years—while the Muslim Middle East establishes a new political modus vivendi, which may

include Islamist regimes from Libya to Pakistan. Washington should keep its focus where it matters: on the deeply flawed, temporary nuclear deal with Shiite Iran and the titanic struggle for preeminence between the clerical regime, and its growing corps of expeditionary Arab Shiite militias, and Saudi Arabia and the Sunnis it will arm to fight the Islamic Republic. We should keep our eye on Turkey's historic reassertion of its Sunni Muslim identity and the possibility that the country (which may, too, go nuclear and reassert dominance in the northern Middle East) could also crack up from its many contradictions. We should endeavor to understand that Egypt's ruler, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, sits atop a volcano that could destabilize what's left of North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. Washington should try to contain the region's convulsions, to keep them from spilling into Europe, still America's most essential allies, and fragile Middle Eastern states worthy of our help—Jordan and the proto-nation of Kurdistan in northern Iraq.

This assumes, of course, that the United States intends to remain a Middle Eastern power. ♦



Hamas militants prepare to execute 18 Palestinian 'collaborators' in Gaza, August 22, 2014.



Unity, Diana, Nancy Mitford, London (1932)

The Class Act

Just how delightful were the Mitford sisters? BY JUDY BACHRACH

All right, so Diana had Britain's Fascist-in-Chief in tow, smouldering at her across the dinner table and chatting in baby talk down the telephone. But Hitler: do admit. That was something more. The man with the real power, the one who had putsched his way to the top and had the whole of Germany swaying to his oratory, whom even hard-headed British people sought to encounter on their visits to Munich. If Unity were able to write to her sister and say oh, by the way Nard,

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The Six
The Lives of the Mitford Sisters
 by Laura Thompson
 St. Martin's, 400 pp., \$29.99

you'll never guess who I've met... Well. In that sense, therefore, Hitler represented something comprehensible in the context of a young girl's imagination, a bizarre crush plus an ace of trumps in the lifelong Mitford game of sister whist.

Do you understand the full meaning of any sentence—any phrase at all—in the above paragraph? I ask only because it is just one of many, many in *The Six*, a peculiar, jumbled account

by Laura Thompson of the famous British Mitford sisters (yes, there were six of them, daughters all of David Freeman-Mitford, Baron Redesdale) who lived in an era when lovely grammatical English—which at least two of the sisters actually mastered—flourished. When a reader was spared such startling imagery as: “Death, which had sat fidgeting in the waiting room since the first day of war, had at last risen to claim great galumphing Boud, who had rampaged through life like an innocent puppy but had held so much unfathomable darkness.”

Both above excerpts refer, in their own lumbering way, largely to Unity Mitford, a madwoman with, like all

HULTON ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES

her sisters, a stupid nickname (Bobo in her case) and a predictable fondness for her pet rat, Ratar: She was the Mitford sister who evolved into a dull and unintelligent Nazi (“I want everyone to know I’m a Jew hater,” she wrote), so taken with the guy who *putsched* his way to the top, in the author’s infelicitous phrase, that she visited Adolf Hitler in the fatherland some 140 times. Then she committed suicide inexpertly—the bullet aimed at her brain lodged in her head for more than eight years before death ceased its fidgeting—in other words, not soon enough to improve the flow of this indifferent book packed with multiple biographies.

Mitford-minders will also possibly recognize an initial glancing reference to Diana, a prettier and older version of Unity, who became, on falling for the famously lecherous British fascist leader Sir Oswald Mosley (whom she eventually married at the home of, yes, Joseph Goebbels), a fellow fascist, and was eventually packed off to prison.

So you see the problem, I’m certain. Six aristocratic sisters. Two of them (Deborah, who married the 11th duke of Devonshire, and Pamela, who didn’t even do that much) comparatively ordinary. Another two repulsive. And the final two—we get to these at last—really talented and fascinating. They are of course: the expert muckraker Jessica Mitford, a onetime Communist who authored *The American Way of Death*, an indictment of our funeral industry that became a bestseller and an inspiration for the film *The Loved One*; and Nancy Mitford, the crystal-line novelist who wrote *The Blessing*, a cunning send-up of both British and French mores.

Still, one might ask oneself: If 75 percent of the Mitford girls were either unexceptional or total fruitcakes, why bother spending a minute in their company?

The answer lies in Nancy’s equally delightful novel *The Pursuit of Love*, published in 1945, which mythologized,

actually canonized, the whole Mitford family—renamed Radlett in the book—and became a bestseller. Gone the Nazis and fascist members of the aristocracy; in their place, a more benign and eccentric “Uncle Matthew” who actually despises all foreigners, especially Germans. Nancy’s own imperfections are smoothed over: She has been recast in the novel as the lovely Linda, who falls eventually for the gallant and noble Fabrice de Sauverterre, a valiant French warrior against Nazism and a friend of de Gaulle.

Of course, eccentricities abound in the novel as they did in life, but in the

clever Nancy had in mind when she set out to rewrite history as fiction: ideology unhinged from fanaticism, giddiness transmuted into gold. In her usual smart and incisive way Nancy Mitford was the queen of revisionism, the master sculptor who recast all the sisters in glitter. But that doesn’t mean that a biographer needs to do the same.

And that’s precisely the problem for the author of *The Six*, which is not meant to be a work of fiction. Thompson understands the value of well-executed literary propaganda, gets what Nancy was really up to. But she doesn’t know what to do about it, doesn’t really

wish to defrock the myth entirely. Denuded, most of the Mitford girls seem like members of a lot of other families, lofty or otherwise: They are by turns awkward, interesting, puzzling, idiotic, sometimes vicious, and often plain stupid and exasperating. In *The Six* they acquire, thanks to Thompson—all of them, including the least worthy—the indifferent patina of absolution.

The Unity Mitford who constantly stalked a willing Führer? “If Hitler could turn on charm, the Mitfords embodied it,” the author notes complacently. The Diana of real life who married the repulsive Oswald Mosley, the fascist who waited on Mussolini? “[I]s it so hard to understand why

she fell for this man who erupted into her life with the bounding force” of a wolfhound? Thompson actually asks.

Well, yes, it is hard to understand, with or without a wolfhound; but as it turns out, the author believes she can clear up the mystery in no time: “Our old friend sex played a huge part in all of this.”

Personally, I’m not too certain about Hitler’s charm (that isn’t the characteristic that immediately springs to mind when his name crops up) or, for that matter, about “our old friend sex,” as a rationale for everything. But I am damn sure that when a biographer relies on those two elements to explain away revolting behavior in her subjects she does a disservice to everyone: not least, the reader. ♦



Deborah, Duchess of Devonshire, at Chatsworth (1976)

fictional version they are the permissible, charming oddities of a great old family, defanged and much improved. The pet rat makes a cameo, reworked only slightly as a sickly mouse named Brenda who dies young. “No great loss I should say,” Uncle Matthew informs the young mourners. “That mouse stank like merry hell.” There are also several infidelities, some with bounders, or at least imperfect candidates for marriage, but these are waved away by the same delightful, ditzzy Linda who says of her second flawed husband: “Well, he’s heaven. He’s a frightfully serious man, you know, a Communist, and so am I now, and we are surrounded by comrades all day...”

Impossible for any bit of dialogue to get more anodyne—which is just what

Farewell, Obama

For a new president, a new blueprint for defense.

BY MACKUBIN THOMAS OWENS

The late 1980s and early '90s were characterized by liberal optimism, if not triumphalism. The Berlin Wall had fallen and the Soviet Union had dissolved, marking the end of the Cold War. In 1989, Francis Fukuyama had written an influential article entitled "The End of History," which argued that with the collapse of the Communist Soviet Union, liberal democracy had prevailed as the universal ideology. While conflict might continue on the peripheries of the liberal world order, the trend was toward a more peaceful and prosperous world. The economic component of the end-of-history narrative was globalization, the triumph of liberal capitalism.

The end-of-history narrative was complemented by a technological-optimism narrative, which held that the United States could maintain its dominant position in the international order by exploiting the "revolution in military affairs." This complementary narrative, arising from the rapid coalition victory over Saddam Hussein that drove Iraqi forces out of Kuwait, led some influential defense experts to argue that emerging technologies and the military revolution had the potential to transform the very nature of war.

One of the most influential volumes of this period was *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (1990), in which Joseph Nye coined the phrase "soft power," which he defined as shaping the preferences of others by noncoercive means such as culture,

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The Big Stick
*The Limits of Soft Power
and the Necessity of Military Force*
by Eliot A. Cohen
Basic Books, 304 pp., \$27.99

political values, ideology, and diplomacy in contrast to "the hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants." Even if soft power made sense in the 1990s, does it still make sense today?

Despite a rising China; naked Russian aggression against Ukraine and other Eastern European states; the proliferation of jihadi movements, especially ISIS; Iranian and North Korean troublemaking; and the debacle in Syria, many American policy makers, especially within the Obama administration, remain wedded to soft power as the answer to international affairs. They contend that those who rely on force are acting against the arc of history, which, they claim, favors soft power in this brave new world.

Eliot A. Cohen, eminent scholar and author of innumerable books on national security affairs and civil-military relations, isn't buying this argument, and in *The Big Stick*, he makes the case for hard power. It is an excellent response to what can only be called strategic happy talk, a phenomenon that has adversely affected American security policy for over two decades.

Cohen begins by noting that although after a decade-and-a-half of war many Americans still believe that the United States should continue to play the role of guarantor of world order, leader of free states, and "spokesman for, and in some cases defender of, the liberties of foreign peoples in remote lands," a great many Ameri-

cans do not. *The Big Stick* addresses the issues that have given rise to skepticism about the use of military power: What role should military power play in foreign policy? What are its limits? What is the purpose of the armed forces? Why should they be used for anything beyond self-defense? What are the lessons of recent wars? What are the main threats and challenges that the United States faces? What are the main instruments of military power—so-called hard power?

The argument unfolds logically. In his opening chapter, entitled "Why the United States?," Cohen makes a convincing case for continued American primacy. Although he does not mention him by name, his argument is essentially a restatement of Robert Gilpin's theory of hegemonic stability, which holds that a liberal world order does not arise spontaneously as the result of some global invisible hand. Instead, such a system requires a hegemonic power, a state willing and able to provide the world with the collective goods of economic stability and international security. For a hundred years, from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to the beginning of World War I, Great Britain was that power; from 1945 until the Obama administration, the United States pursued a bipartisan grand strategy of primacy based on hegemonic stability. In both cases, the hegemonic power assumed the role not out of altruism but because it was in its national interest to do so.

Next, Cohen examines (and refutes) the five main arguments against the use of military power to maintain American primacy: that the world is becoming more peaceful and no longer needs this sort of policing; the realist view that, somehow, the logic of Great Power politics will maintain peace in a way that it has not done in the past; the explicit view that soft power can replace hard power; that the United States is incompetent in applying hard power; and the argument that domestic priorities require a reorientation from external to internal affairs.

From the question of "Why the United States?" Cohen moves to address the lessons of 15 years of war—"Without

coming to terms with America's recent strategic past, it is impossible to think clearly about its strategic future"—and here he is tough but fair:

Wars must be judged by what they helped avoid as well as by what they produced. Those who direct them should be judged by what they knew and could have known, as well as what the underlying facts actually were. Once a war has been launched, even in error, one must judge how well or poorly it was waged, because it is possible to recover from a misconceived conflict. On all of these points, the wars of 2001 to the present offer a mixed and unsettling record.

Cohen then addresses what he calls the "American hand," examining the strengths and weaknesses of American power. He shows that the United States still possesses a strong hand in international affairs—"no other country, or collection of countries, has a better hand to play in international politics"—but that it has made self-defeating choices about defense spending, strategy, and force structure. As others have noted before, American decline is a choice, and although Cohen lays most of the blame at the feet of civilian policymakers, he does not let the uniformed military off the hook. He also criticizes professional military education and its failure to produce strategic thinkers, yielding what the British strategist Colin Gray has called "a black hole where American strategy ought to reside."

Cohen also assesses the four major challenges we face: The rise of China, the continuing threat from assorted jihadist movements, "dangerous states" such as Russia, Iran, and North Korea, and the challenge posed by "ungoverned space" and the "commons"—that is to say, the maritime realm, space, and cyberspace, which no one state or alliance rules or controls. China clearly tops his list of challenges, but we ignore others at our peril. The problem is that the American hand, as strong as it is, is hardpressed to respond to all the challenges simultaneously. An important role of strategy is to establish priorities, and deciding how to allocate military power in response to these diverse

threats will be the great strategic challenge for the foreseeable future. As Frederick the Great is supposed to have said, "He who attempts to defend everything ends up defending nothing."

The final chapter on the logic of hard power examines how the United States should think about the actual use of hard power: "The rules of thumb and strategic aphorisms that do not make

Eliot Cohen addresses the issues that have given rise to skepticism about the use of military power: What role should military power play in foreign policy? What are its limits? What is the purpose of the armed forces? Why should they be used for anything beyond self-defense?

sense and those that do." Here he discusses such concepts as risk assessment, the aptitude of different kinds of forces to deal with a variety of challenges, and establishing strategic priorities.

In theory, political and military leaders at the top of the U.S. decision-making pyramid should establish national security priorities and devote adequate time to the most important of them. In practice they find themselves dealing with multiple problems—about many of which they have only superficial knowledge—at the same time. They have too little time to learn, and less ability to set priorities.

Cohen also argues that certain concepts that once made strategic sense no longer do so: containment, deterrence, "end states," and exit strategies. He also takes issue with the idea of "grand

strategy." I am persuaded by his argument against the first four, but not the fifth. For as long as it is not applied mechanically—all too often the case when it comes to strategy in general—grand strategy has utility in discussions of hard power, especially when designed to think about how to bring to bear *all* the elements of national power—military, economic, and diplomatic—to secure the nation's interests and objectives.

Most useful of all, perhaps, Cohen concludes by discussing the circumstances under which military force should be used. He is notably critical of the Weinberger Doctrine, six rules for the use of military power offered by Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger in 1984. After laying out the shortcomings of the Weinberger Doctrine, Cohen suggests a list of his own:

- Understand your war for what it is, not what you wish it to be.

- Planning is important, but being able to adapt is more important.

- You will prefer to go short, but prepare to go long.

- While engaging in today's fight, prepare for tomorrow's challenge.

- Adroit strategy matters but perseverance matters more.

- A president can launch a war, but to win it requires congressional and popular support.

In sum, *The Big Stick* is an immensely useful assessment of military power and why it remains necessary. Cohen is especially effective in refuting the arguments against hard power and American hegemony, for as his teacher Samuel Huntington once observed, "The maintenance of U.S. primacy matters for the world as well as for the United States."

A world without U.S. primacy will be a world with more violence and disorder and less democracy and economic growth than a world where the United States continues to have more influence than any other country in shaping global affairs. The sustained international primacy of the United States is central to the welfare and security of Americans and to the future of freedom, democracy, open economies, and international order in the world.

Indeed, the Obama administration's retreat from primacy provides a preview of the world described by Huntington: a fragmented globe in which our friends and allies are making the best deals they can because they no longer have faith in the United States while our adversaries act aggressively, constantly probing for weaknesses. The idea that the use of military power is at odds with the arc of history is equally absurd. Its use must be governed by prudence, but it cannot be unilaterally dismissed as an instrument of statecraft. For too long, American policymakers have acted as if diplomacy alone is sufficient to achieve our foreign policy goals; but to cite Frederick the Great again, "Diplomacy without arms is like music without instruments." Policymakers need to relearn the lesson that diplomacy and force are two sides of the same coin.

Prudence also recognizes that the use of military power cannot be open-ended. During the Clinton administration it was suggested that American foreign policy had become (in the words of Michael Mandelbaum) "social work," and in 2000, George W. Bush campaigned *against* the overuse of American armed forces for reasons not associated with American interests. Cohen recognizes the limits of military force, but there is enough ambiguity in *The Big Stick* to allow critics to charge that he supports the use of force in order to secure goals beyond American interests.

The sole purpose of American power is—or should be—to secure the American republic, to protect liberty, and facilitate the prosperity of the American people. It is not, or should not be, intended to create a corporatist globalism divorced from national interest or national greatness. The United States does not have a moral entitlement to superior power for the global good: We have to work constantly at maintaining it. A healthy regard for our safety and happiness requires that American power remain supreme, but we should never succumb to the idea that the purpose of American power is to act in the interest of others, the "international community," international institutions, or the like. ♦

BCA

One Man's Pontiff

Faith and politics—and not necessarily in that order.

BY NAOMI SCHAEFER RILEY

What is the Francis Effect? Recent surveys show that despite all the hype since Jorge Mario Bergoglio first became pope in March 2013, there has been little change in how often Roman Catholics in America attend Mass. This is not to say, though, that the pope has not deeply changed the lives of many disaffected American Catholics. Here, Mark Shriver sets out to understand more about Pope Francis, and in the process, he experiences a personal Francis effect.

Shriver, son of Sargent Shriver and Eunice Kennedy Shriver—both devout and prominent members of the church—has something of a personal crisis of faith after his parents die. Things are not helped by the words and policies coming out of the Vatican: "With each pedophilia scandal," he writes, "with each corruption scandal, with each fumbling statement on homosexuality or the role of women or the status of Islam, I started to think that my father might have been mistaken, or at least too blindly loyal to the Catholic Church, if not the Catholic faith."

Shriver's grouping together of pedophilia scandals with the church's views on Islam may seem an odd juxtaposition, but he is representative of a certain kind of American Catholic, who objects not only to the deep problems that have plagued the church in recent years but who also wants the stamp of approval for his liberal political views, and is getting tired of waiting for it.

Naomi Schaefer Riley, a senior fellow at the Independent Women's Forum, is the author of The New Trail of Tears: How Washington Is Destroying American Indians.

Pilgrimage
My Search for the Real Pope Francis
by Mark K. Shriver
Random House, 320 pp., \$28

Fortunately, Pope Francis came along at just the right time. Intrigued with his who-am-I-to-judge attitude toward gay people and his decision not to live in the Apostolic Palace but, instead, alongside his fellow priests in the Vatican guesthouse, Shriver sets out to learn about how Bergoglio became Pope Francis.

The grandson of Italian immigrants who came to Argentina between the wars, Bergoglio grew up with extended family in a world where family, neighborhood, and church all seem deeply intertwined. He was particularly close to his maternal grandmother Rosa, who fully embraced his decision to go to seminary, even when his parents weren't so sure. Shriver cites Bergoglio's recollections about Rosa, suggesting that she was responsible for the tolerant attitude toward those of other faiths that he has maintained. Upon seeing two women from the Salvation Army, Rosa told a young Bergoglio, "They are Protestants, but they are good." Bergoglio writes: "That was the wisdom of true religion. They were good women who did good things."

But her ecumenism was not a sign of weak faith. A letter she wrote to Francis in case she died before his ordination reads, in part:

May my grandchildren, to whom I gave the best of my heart, have a long and happy life. But if one day pain, illness, or the loss of someone they love should afflict them, let

them remember that one sigh before the Tabernacle, where the greatest and most venerable of the martyrs is kept, and one glance at Mary at the foot of the Cross, will cause a drop of balm to fall on the deepest and most painful wounds.

Shriver marvels at the faith of this woman, but one suspects throughout *Pilgrimage* that it is his own sheltered life that is unusual. When interviewing one of the priests who works in an area rife with drug dealers wanting to kill him, Shriver writes, “I had never spent time with someone who gave his whole life to God at such risk.” He still hasn’t gotten past how his college buddy gave up sex to become a priest. Perhaps this is merely a matter of spending too much time in the United States and not enough time in places like Argentina. But here’s a news flash: The whole world over there are people who sacrifice their own safety in the name of God every day. Shriver’s endless interviews with every priest, cardinal, and taxi driver who had ever met Bergoglio prompt so many of Shriver’s naïve musings.

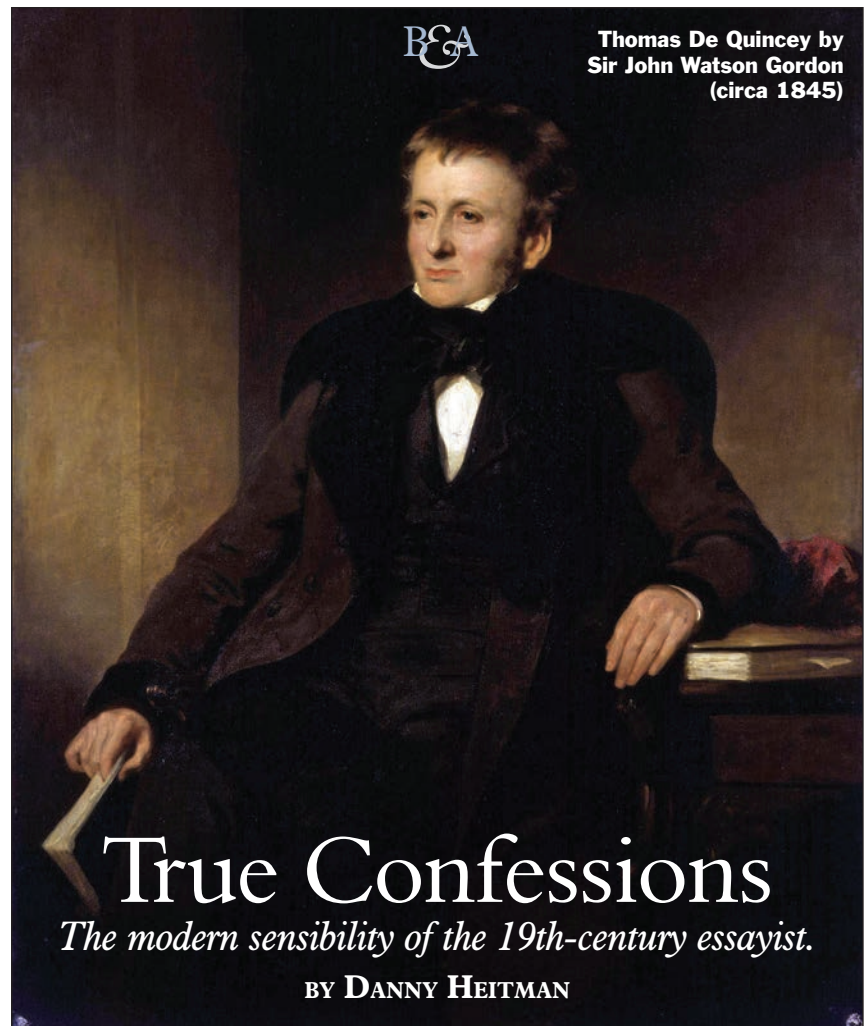
Without taking anything away from the honorable and faithful work of Pope Francis—who lived a life mostly among the poor and downtrodden, who made attempts to sow peace across religious and political lines in a country that seems to know only discord, who tried to protect his colleagues from the dangerous power struggles of their time—it is worth noting that there are holy men and women living throughout South America, Africa, and the Middle East who do the same thing. Ultimately, what Shriver finds is a man of his time and place. Having been born and raised under Argentine governments that have run the gamut from socialism to fascism and back again, Bergoglio could hardly be anything else. He is a witness to the suffering of his fellow countrymen. But nothing ever seems to improve in his country.

Not surprisingly, Shriver is most touched by Bergoglio’s statements on behalf of “social justice.” It is time to stop being individualists, he has said, to stop studying the problems and start doing something about them.

He decries the structural causes of poverty. Shriver is in thrall when the pope tells an audience of workers, “You are social poets: creators of work, builders of housing, producers of food, above all for people left behind by the world market.” Never mind that they have no access to the

world market—or any market since they live under oppressive regimes.

Shriver concludes that Pope Francis is “the real deal.” But more important, perhaps, Shriver gets what he has been missing from his faith: confirmation that Catholicism is liberalism dressed up in nice robes. ♦



In the vivid and varied world of 19th-century British literature, Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859) endures as a striking footnote. He produced 250 essays published in 21 volumes, along with dabbling in fiction, yet is known today—to the extent he’s known at all—for one book, an 1822 memoir of addiction entitled

Danny Heitman is the author of A Summer of Birds: John James Audubon at Oakley House.

Guilty Thing
A Life of Thomas De Quincey
by Frances Wilson
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 416 pp., \$30

Confessions of an English Opium-Eater. It was a publishing sensation in its time, going through more than two-dozen editions by the end of the century. Nearly two centuries after publication, De Quincey’s masterwork remains in print.

Even so, the De Quincey scholar Barry Milligan has described *Confessions* as “one of those books almost everyone has heard of but very few have read.” Milligan suggests that De Quincey is little known today because he worked primarily as an essayist, a form not as celebrated now as the novel. Perhaps a more obvious explanation is that Thomas De Quincey was not a likable man, and his writing often isn’t very likable, either.

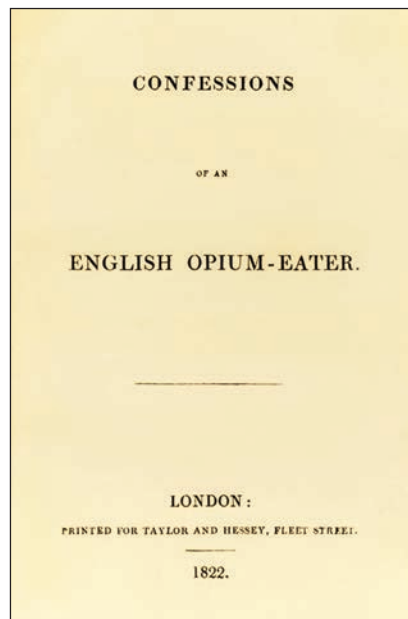
That reality rises to the surface of Frances Wilson’s appreciative, yet unflinching account of De Quincey’s life. She begins her perceptive biography in December 1811, when two London families (including a baby) were slaughtered in their homes in what came to be known as the Ratcliffe Highway murders. De Quincey was fascinated by the case and, ages before Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, drew upon the killings as inspiration for a lengthy literary narrative, “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts.” Like Capote, De Quincey seemed to have more interest in the mechanics of crime than its victims and was keen to commodify real-life tragedy into a cultural event.

His deepest vein of dark material came from his own life, which was dogged by pain from the start. A native of Manchester, De Quincey was 6 years old when his 9-year-old sister died, and his father died soon afterward. In 1796, De Quincey’s mother changed the family’s name from “Quincey” to “De Quincey” because it sounded more aristocratic, suggesting that young Thomas came by his flair for self-drama honestly. By 1802, an unhappy De Quincey had run away from school to live as a vagabond in London, eventually enrolling at Oxford, then leaving without a degree. He recalled taking his first opium in 1804, establishing a habit that followed him to the grave. Milligan notes that De Quincey took massive daily doses of laudanum, a mixture of opium and alcohol, “and found it impossible to stop doing so until his death at 74, a ripe old age in the mid-nineteenth century.”

Lots of other literary figures of the

century, in varying degrees, were getting high on opium, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Wilkie Collins, John Keats, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, Sir Walter Scott, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Charles Dickens. But De Quincey’s *Confessions* helped bring opium use out in the open—and as Milligan noted, the modifier “English” before “Opium-Eater” signaled that a drug widely regarded as a vice of the Orient had been domesticated for British consumption.

First published without a byline in *London Magazine*, *Confessions* came



along when English journalism was especially hungry for copy. Boosted by improvements in printing technology, the periodical trade was booming, with essayists such as Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt enjoying a steady pipeline for their work.

Lamb, a friend of De Quincey who had nasty troubles of his own and figures prominently here, provides an interesting study in contrast with the author of *Confessions*. A bright young man forced to drop out of school because of his family’s financial problems, Charles Lamb took a clerical job at 14, writing his wry and witty essays on the side. When Lamb was 20, his older sister Mary stabbed their mother to death during a mental breakdown and was remanded to Lamb’s custody. It was the stuff of

blockbuster memoir—the kind of story that today might be optioned to Hollywood—but Lamb didn’t publicly write about the ordeal. Instead, he focused on finely wrought musings about such topics as roast pig, whist, chimney sweepers, and Valentine’s Day.

Lamb and De Quincey underscored the essay’s divergent paths in the period, which might be oversimplified as a choice between Lamb’s genteel, Johnsonian disquisitions on the one hand and De Quincey’s spill-your-guts school of personal confession on the other. But of course, true genius defies easy category. What the reader notices in Lamb’s essays, despite their air of safe charm, is how much of their author’s poignant personal challenges subtly color the current of the commentary. In beautifully rendered compositions such as “New Year’s Eve” and “A Bachelor’s Complaint of the Behaviour of Married People,” the bittersweet loneliness of Lamb and his quietly heroic resilience come through.

But what often seems missing from De Quincey, despite his promise of candor, is a sense of true intimacy with his audience. He uses salutations such as “courteous reader” throughout the text of *Confessions*; but his prevailing attitude is that of a man who neither cherishes his readers nor especially cares if he has any. In one passage, he absolves himself of any blame for narrative jumbles and confusing chronology, admitting that

My way of writing is rather to think aloud, and follow my own humors, than much to consider who is listening to me; and if I stop to consider what is proper to be said to this or that person, I shall soon come to doubt whether any part at all is proper.

It’s an approach that recruits the reader as therapist, as if we’re responsible for helping to clarify the author’s mind, not the other way around.

By their nature, addicts are a self-absorbed bunch, and De Quincey, in Frances Wilson’s rendering, seems a classic specimen of the form. She notes De Quincey’s deft use of flattery to secure a first meeting with Lamb, during which Lamb soon discovered that

his ostensible admirer's professed interest was strictly tactical. De Quincey wanted to use Lamb to meet Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He was a poetry groupie who essentially stalked his idol, William Wordsworth. Virginia Woolf shrewdly suggested that De Quincey was, at base, a frustrated poet, never fully at home in the plainer particulars prose demanded: "His enemy, the hard fact, became cloudlike and supple under his hands," she wrote.

"The English Mail-Coach," perhaps De Quincey's best essay, hints at the greatness he might have achieved if he had been able to conquer his demons. A meditation on the mail coach as instrument of his century's increasing speed, the essay also expresses one of De Quincey's defining themes: the mutability of perception. Remarking on the placement of a small screen to divide different classes of passengers from each other, he invites us to consider how we can render unpleasantness invisible simply by choosing not to look at it. He also plays with our notions of hierarchy by arguing that a coach's outside seats, which are cheaper, are actually better than the socially coveted ones inside the carriage. Along with such lucid arguments, however, De Quincey indulges in stream-of-consciousness paragraphs that read like William Blake by way of William S. Burroughs.

Wilson argues for De Quincey's continuing relevance, mentioning that, in addition to Burroughs, he paved the way for such diverse writers as Virginia Woolf and Jorge Luis Borges. One does see hints of De Quincey in Woolf's essays; his telescoping from eye-level detail to cosmic speculation sometimes rhymes thematically with Woolf's "Street Haunting" and "The Death of the Moth." But De Quincey's work presents a model to be refined, not directly emulated. His most prominent admirers over the years, including Woolf, learned best from De Quincey's mistakes, including the limits of his moral vision. "With immense powers of language at his command," wrote Woolf, "he was incapable of a sustained and passionate interest in the affairs of other people."

Thomas De Quincey was a small man, physically and, perhaps, spiritually, who nevertheless casts a shadow across modern culture. His tabloid sensibility chimes with the hyperbole of our headlines. His career, which catered to an ever-expanding media culture increasingly willing to indulge content without context and disclosure without discernment, has obvious parallels with our age. *Confessions*

of an English Opium-Eater has many successors among the bestselling tell-alls about addiction, abuse, and anxiety—a literary cottage industry that sometimes seems less interested in transcending personal dysfunction than promoting it.

"We are all De Quinceyan now," Wilson concludes. She might not mean that sentence as an indictment, but it is one. ♦

BCA

Of Saints and Vandals

An art historian's earthly delights.

BY JAMES GARDNER

Whatever Gary Vikan, former director of the Walters Museum in Baltimore, thinks of the larger world, he has a somewhat jaundiced view of the art world itself, or at least that corner of it that forms his main area of expertise, medieval and Byzantine art. And the impression we are left with from this lively volume is that the holy and the unholy rub elbows rather more frequently than we imagine.

In his autobiography, which is not really an autobiography, Vikan reveals himself to be a man of paradoxes. A lapsed Lutheran from Minnesota who converted to Judaism when he married a Jewish woman, he claims to have no strong religious convictions, but has devoted much of his career to the examination and publicizing of spirituality in art. At the same time, although he is an exacting scholar who has devoted much of his professional life to one of the most rarefied and least "popular" of disciplines, Byzantine art, he has written a fast-paced account of his years in the trade. Indeed, even his scholarly writings on Byzantine art reveal a liveliness and accessibility that

are rare among scholars in his field.

If *Sacred and Stolen* is not really an autobiography, that is because the personal details it provides about the author and his family are subordinated—perhaps at his editor's suggestion?—to narrating the juicier bits of art world gossip. As he describes his formative years, Vikan went from a mildly undisciplined Carleton freshman to one of Princeton's star graduate students in Byzantine art. One would be interested to have a somewhat fuller sense of his intellectual evolution. All the same, we can be grateful for the pungent portraits Vikan provides of such giants in the field as Kurt Weitzmann and Ernst Kitzinger, among others.

This book really comes alive when the author turns, with manifest relish, to the wheelings and dealings that go into the sale of antiquities and the creation of exhibitions. Each one of the stories Vikan tells comes with head-spinning twists and turns, and nothing is ever as it seems. Serving for some time

Sacred and Stolen
Confessions of a Museum Director
by Gary Vikan
SelectBooks, 256 pp., \$22.95

James Gardner's latest book is *Buenos Aires: The Biography of a City*.



Gary Vikan

as an adviser to Dominique de Menil, the heiress who created the Menil Collection in Houston, Vikan recounts the drama leading up to her purchase of a hoard of Byzantine treasures from a dealer in Geneva and her rescue of frescoes looted from the Church of Saint Euphemianos in Cyprus.

Among the sundry tumults that Vikan encountered at the Walters, one episode involves the theft of a priceless peach bloom vase (as well as many other objects of Asian art) by a deranged security guard who simply wanted to live with them. Another has to do with the return to the museum, of a Renoir that had been stolen from the Walters a half-century earlier. Some of the most entertaining accounts here have to do with the travails of mounting an exhibition—or more precisely, coaxing recalcitrant governments into coughing up the objects they had promised to

send. One of these involves medieval Ethiopian manuscripts, the arrival of which was imperiled when the monks who owned them began “vomiting blood,” clearly a sign from God that the objects must never leave the country. When they finally did arrive, the patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church came to the opening of the show, trailed by protesters and threatening to place a curse on Vikan and his family for some perceived slight or double-dealing.

At least that exhibition, a great show entitled “African Zion,” came to fruition. The same cannot be said for “The Land of Myth and Fire: Art of Ancient and Medieval Georgia,” which had to be canceled at the last minute, despite the energetic intervention of Eduard Shevardnadze, then president of Georgia, because of the religious compunctions of the Georgian people.

Through these anecdotes, Vikan

manages to pull back the veil and reveal what really happens behind the scenes at an art museum. Most people walk into museums feeling that they have entered a world of serenity and elevated orderliness. But if we are to believe *Sacred and Stolen*, that is far from the case and what we are really seeing is that same tangle of chaos, compromise, and anxiety that characterizes all things human. Many of the purest works of antiquity—objects enthroned and canonized in their hermetically sealed display cases—have entered the country through dubious means, and many of the finest loan exhibitions have had to be negotiated with distinctly unsavory governments. Of course, the art world is no more unsavory than any other province of human activity: Only its appearance of being otherwise, of being above all earthly concerns, provokes that visceral sense of shock when we ultimately learn that it isn't so.

Indeed, the title of Vikan's book captures the author's divided sense of his chosen profession. Significantly, it is *Sacred and Stolen*, not *Sacred or Stolen*, and Vikan, who seems to have a great appreciation of human frailty—he even had drinks, years later, with the guard who stole the peach blossom vase—concludes that the two often go hand-in-hand. Ultimately, he believes that, often if not always, it is the same impulse that leads a crackpot security guard to steal a vase from the Walters and leads Dominique de Menil to purchase (and thereby rescue) frescoes looted from Cyprus: a response to the spiritual beauty of art, and of the larger world. As he writes toward the end:

That transcendence, which is my version of religion, had fueled in me an evangelical zeal. I wanted everyone to have that powerful and enriching experience of art that I had.

Out of context, the two sentences might sound like the sort of boilerplate any museum director would say. But it is a tribute to *Sacred and Stolen* that by the last page, you have no doubt about Gary Vikan's sincerity, or the force with which he defends his convictions. ♦

SAM HOLDEN / COURTESY OF GARY VIKAN



Welcome to the Club

On Amazon, a hidden gem is just a click away.

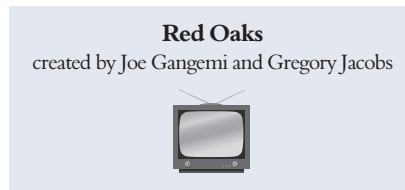
BY JOHN PODHORETZ

American TV has become the equivalent of India's Bollywood—an almost unimaginably prolific source of filmed entertainment. Bollywood produces more than a thousand movies a year, more than double Hollywood's output. Similarly, the networks and cable channels and streaming services have been flooding, nay, tsunami-ing us with series. Netflix, the most active of the streamers, has committed a staggering \$6 billion this year to produce original material. It is estimated that Amazon will spend over \$3 billion.

They are tossing off shows the way Georges Simenon and Isaac Asimov wrote novels. They secure cultural cachet with flashy stuff that commands watercooler conversation (Netflix's *House of Cards*, Amazon's *Transparent*) while they make bank on the comic-book science-fiction stuff (*Stranger Things* and *Jessica Jones* and *Luke Cage* on Netflix, *The Man in the High Castle* on Amazon) that draws young men in basements like moths to flames.

These are the programs on which these services spend their promotional dollars. But since they are producing shows by the dozens, many go begging for attention because they're just too quirky to get the kind of PR support they would need to break into the public consciousness. It is likely you've never heard of some really good stuff—in particular, a remarkable show on Amazon called *Red Oaks*. So I'm telling you about it.

I suppose you'd call *Red Oaks* a sitcom because each episode runs a half-hour, and it centers on college-age kids working at a country club. Its direct



cinematic influences are the golf comedy *Caddyshack*, the coming-of-age-at-a-beach-club Matt Dillon picture called *The Flamingo Kid*, and the high-school-kids-warts-and-all *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. But it's not jokey, it's not wild and wacky, and it's not exaggerated.

It is, rather, a pitch-perfect re-creation of a certain time (1985), a certain place (northern New Jersey), and a certain type of people (secular Jews). If Philip Roth had written a screenplay for a film directed by John Hughes, *Red Oaks* would have been the result. Call it *Goodbye, Columbus* meets *Risky Business*. I would never have believed that such a mash-up could be anything but a calamity, but *Red Oaks* is something very special.

David Meyers (the British actor Craig Roberts, who you'd never know is British) is a college-age kid working as a tennis pro at the Red Oaks Country Club. David looks like a classic nebbish—short, skinny, big-nosed—but this show is too interesting to stick with first impressions. David turns out to be a first-class athlete with a gorgeous girlfriend named Karen (Gage Golightly), who was the head cheerleader in high school and is now the club's aerobics instructor. He is the only child of an accountant (Richard Kind) and a dissatisfied housewife approaching 50 (Jennifer Grey), who want him to get a nice safe job like his father's. David has larger ambitions—to go to NYU and make movies. The family doesn't have the money. David's mother asks his

father if he's happy: "Happy?" he says. "I'm happy if I look at the obituary page and I'm not listed."

The club's president is a slick, hard-charging Wall Street guy named Doug Getty (Paul Reiser), who likes to hit with David but can't help belittling him. Getty has a blowsy and florid wife (Gina Gershon, the 1990s direct-to-video bombshell, in a revelatory role) and a hip would-be bohemian daughter named Skye who is David's age. David and Skye are attracted to each other, but he's got Karen—or at least he does until the photographer who does most of the club's life-cycle events (a hilarious Josh Meyers) begins seducing her with the promise of making her a model.

Over the course of two seasons, these characters bounce off each other like billiard balls. They are interesting, flawed, tough, not always nice. There are divorces, heart attacks, arrests, drug deals. The two poles on the show are David's father and Getty—the first a good man who has never sought more than his own tiny portion and the second an ambitious go-getter up from nothing who cuts corners, suffers no fools, and is in danger of indictment for insider trading. Which one will David emulate? He has his father's thoughtfulness but Getty's drive. The precise and beautiful performances by Richard Kind and Paul Reiser in these parts (they worked for years together on *Mad About You*) are among the most memorable in any show of the "peak TV" age.

The secret to *Red Oaks*' brilliance is its social exactitude. (The show goes off the rails in only 1 episode of the 20 that have been made, a lame and awkward pseudo-tribute to the bad father-son body-switching movie comedies of the 1980s.) The precision with which its creative team—writers Joe Gangemi and Gregory Jacobs and executive producer David Gordon Green—have captured the look and feel of the time and place makes *Red Oaks* feel more real and more substantial than the movies that inspired it. It's the closest thing to an old-fashioned coming-of-age novel made for American TV. No wonder Amazon didn't quite know how to sell it, but those who find it are fortunate indeed. ♦

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

“After decades of fruitlessly scanning the skies for alien messages, scientists say it’s time to try a basic rule of etiquette: Say ‘hello’ first. A new San Francisco-based organization called METI, or Messaging Extra Terrestrial Intelligence, plans to send signals to distant planets, rather than waiting for them to call Earth.”

—San Jose Mercury News, December 24, 2016

METI International



Project Log

JANUARY 2017

POSTED BY	MESSAGE	DATE / METHOD
A. Franklin STAFF	<i>SMART, FUNNY bipedal species in Local Group region of Virgo Supercluster seeks intelligent, open-minded multicellular organisms for long-distance relationship, cross-cultural communication, maybe more. Looks not important; carbon-based life form a bonus; language use a must. No conquering races, planet-devouring parasites, or Borg, please.</i>	2017.01.23 Sent via radio telescope
S. Rosen STAFF	<i>TO THE UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECT— You were the brightly colored something-or-other that hovered silently for four minutes in the night sky above Pueblo, Colorado, on July 27, 1973. We were the hairless apes that stared up at you and pointed sticks that went BOOM. Even though you suddenly zoomed off with a velocity that defies our scientific understanding, we feel like we “had a moment” there. Would love to get to know you better. Coffee sometime?</i>	2017.01.20 Sent via visible-light laser
K. Potrzebie VOLUNTEER	<i>FLIRTY CHAT NOW WITH LONELY SEXY RUSSIAN, AFRICAN, ASIAN, AND AMERICAN BRIDES OF EVERY PHYLUM. WE ARE EARTH BRIDES, THE PREMIER INTERSTELLAR INTRODUCTION AND TOURING SERVICE. AS THE LARGEST, MOST RESPECTED AGENCY ON EARTH WE CAREFULLY SELECT POTENTIAL BRIDES FROM ARCTIC, RAINFOREST, AND TEMPERATE BIOMES. MORE THAN 8 MILLION VERTEBRATE AND INVERTEBRATE SPECIES TO CHOOSE FROM! IF YOU WISH TO MATE, YOU’LL THINK WE’RE GREAT. VISIT EARTHBRIDES.COM NOW AND SEE FOR YOURSELF!</i>	2017.01.17 Painted on exterior of International Space Station
J. Furd STAFF	<i>Is that a coronal mass ejection, or are you just happy to see us?</i>	2017.01.15 Sent via Bracewell probe
R. Feltino VOLUNTEER	<i>Did it hurt? When you fell from ES0270-17 in the NGC 5128 Group?</i>	2017.01.11 Shouted really loudly
E. Trass STAFF	<i>Netflix and chill?</i>	2017.01.08 Written in 12-foot stone monoliths at the top of Cerro El Plomo near Santiago, Chile

