the weekly Standard

JULY 31, 2017

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BIG SUR'S BIG SLIDE
STEVEN F. HAYWARD

How Tehran uses its commercial airlines to transport fighters and combat supplies to Syria

BY EMANUELE OTTOLENGHI

WEEKLYSTANDARD.COM

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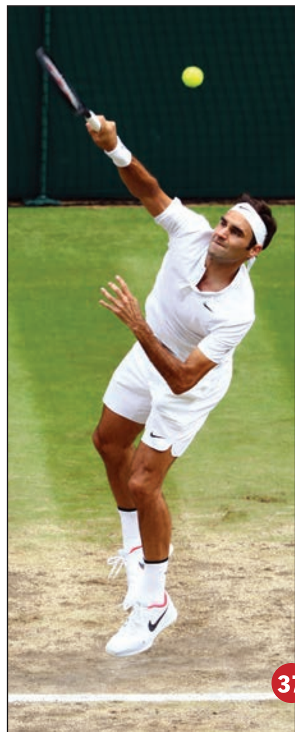
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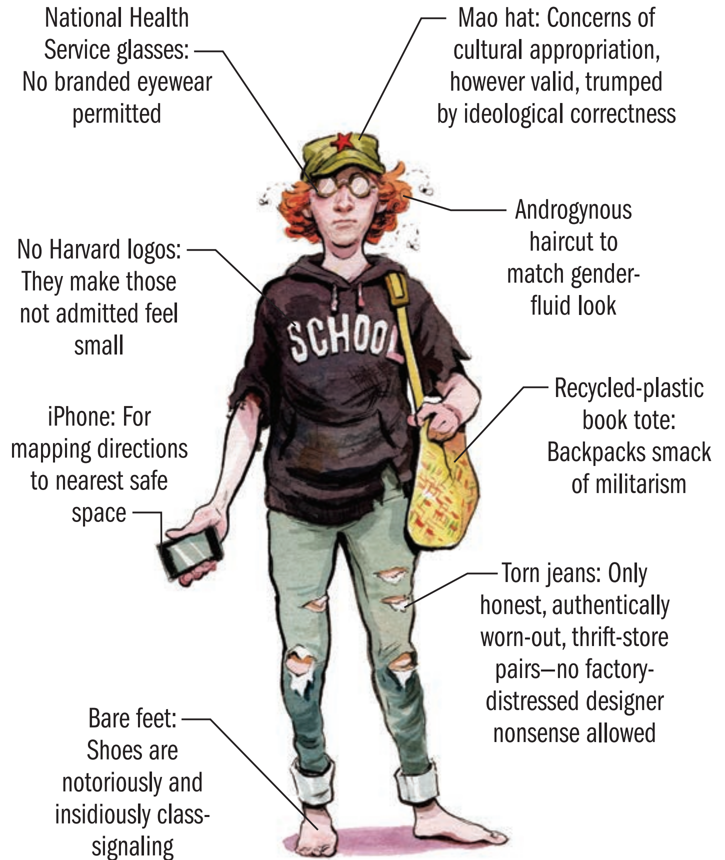
COVER BY GARY LOCKE

Soup and Fishy

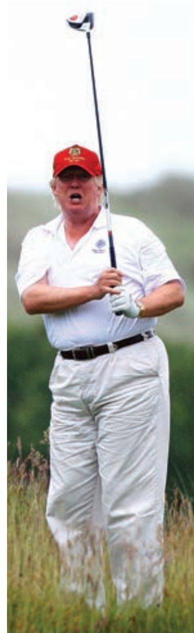
Harvard is banishing the off-campus "final clubs" that have functioned for generations as the school's equivalent of fraternities and sororities, as Naomi Schaefer Riley reports elsewhere in this issue. The university has its reasons, most notably a contentious claim that the clubs foster a culture of sexual assault. But laughably, the school's justification for impinging on students' freedom of association includes the complaint that the clubbable crowd has the nerve to dress up on occasion.

"As many have noted, final clubs reinforce existing campus inequities," proclaimed the university's Committee on the Unrecognized Single-Gender Social Organizations. "Low-income students, who might not own a tuxedo or be comfortable with small-talk at cocktail parties, are disadvantaged from the outset." Nothing is quite so funny as the elitest of elitist institutions denouncing elitism. Still, it's a shame, because once upon a time administrators realized that tuxedos were socially leveling garments—albeit ones that leveled everyone up—and they knew that part of their job was to teach even the most bumpkinish of their charges how to tie a bow-tie, thus making the young scholars fit for adult society.

But if the wearing of fancy clothes is now anathema to Harvard values, The Scrapbook suggests that it is about time the university get serious about enforcing a truly egalitarian dress-code for the student body. ♦



Weight Watchers



Over 2,700 words would seem to be quite a superabundance of prose when you have but one point to make, especially when that point can be made in four words: Donald Trump is overweight. But the folks at *Politico* did just that last week, releasing a breathless piece declaring "Donald Trump is the least athletic president in generations. Here's why it matters."

It matters, apparently, because—well, even thousands of words later, we're not quite sure. The president, it is no secret, has not kept up the athleticism of his youth. The only sport he plays these days is golf. (Though, no doubt, his fingers get a good workout every morning as he tweets away.) *Politico* somewhat snootily suggests that "swinging a [golf] club about 70-80 times in five hours isn't exactly physically taxing." The Scrapbook begs to differ—giving the old niblick and mashie a workout may not be a sweaty business, but it is perfectly respectable physical activity for a septuagenarian. Then again, the magazine does have a point when it knocks Trump for not only using golf carts, but for *driving them on the greens.* (It helps that Trump usually owns the golf course.)

Addressing this weighty issue, *Politico* sniffs, "The red states that went for Trump tend to have higher rates of obesity, sedentary lifestyles and . . . shorter lifespans." Perhaps it helped Trump with voters that he didn't hector them about their health. His weight may be a key to understanding how a plutocrat could come across as a man of the people.

Trump's love of fast food and disdain for the gym lead *Politico* to conclude that he isn't "fit"—and, yes, they seem to mean it in both senses of the word. But is it even remotely conceivable that had Hillary Clinton—not exactly a gym rat—been elected, *Politico* would have had the gall to chide her for not being svelte? ♦

FIGURE ABOVE, BRITT SPENCER; BELOW, NEWSCOM

Hipsters Go Home

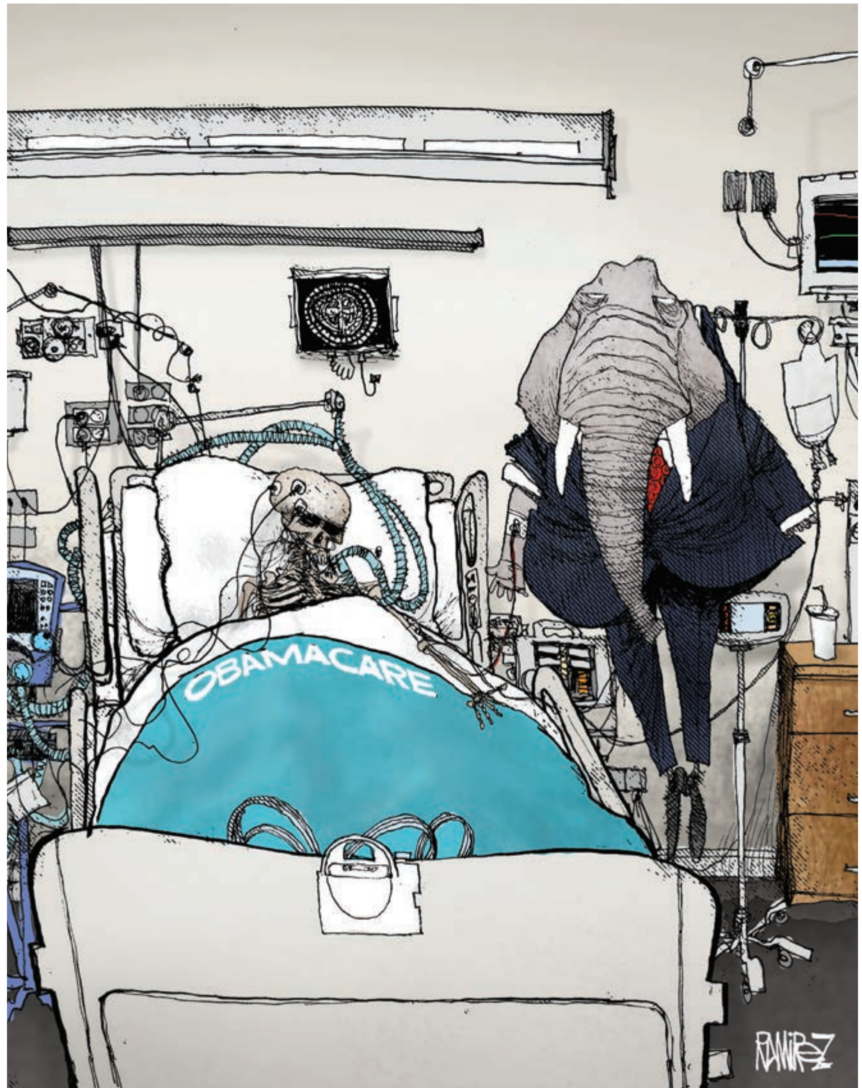
Readers of The Scrapbook will recall the recent item about L.A.'s Boyle Heights neighborhood, where some locals mounted a campaign against an art gallery, claiming it represented an intrusion of gringo culture into the predominantly Hispanic community (see "White Out," March 6, 2017). The activists are back at it, this time doing their best to drive out a coffeehouse that poses a gentrification threat.

The Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement led the effort against the small and short-lived nonprofit art gallery PSSST, confronting the gallery's patrons, yelling at the artsy interlopers to go away, spray-painting the building with racist slogans such as "F— White Art." We noted at the time the threat posed by art: "First come the art galleries and, before you know it, the local bodega has been replaced with an artisanal *boucherie*." And yet, even though a gallery has been successfully hounded from its digs, the vanguard of the hipster hordes has come on nonetheless—in this case in the form of that most insidious of white culture stalking horses: the coffeehouse.

CUP, BIGSTOCK

Weird Wave Coffee Brewers is a groovy sort of place. The shop's website promises "chill vibes." Alas, the vibe isn't chill enough to keep the neighborhood activists from attacking. First they picketed, protesting the June opening of the shop with such charming signs as "F— White Coffee" and "AmeriKKKano to go," the *Los Angeles Times* reported. Then came a physical attack: Early Wednesday morning, July 19, someone in black clothes and a black mask hurled a rock through Weird Wave's glass door. Not cool.

But how is it that such violence continues to be treated as activism? Shouldn't violence, in the context of sustained racial vitriol, count as a hate crime? ♦



Writer's Block

Journalist Rebecca Buckwalter-Poza has earned a coveted place in the annals of silly lawsuits. She covers "Trump and the law" at the magazine *Pacific Standard* and is currently suing the president for blocking her on Twitter.

Last month, you see, the president tweeted that the media had done its best to keep him from winning the White House. She responded, "To be fair you didn't win the WH: Russia won it for you." Nine thousand people on Twitter liked her tweet. Trump was not among them. He blocked her from his Twitter feed, as he has with others who have trolled him.

So now Buckwalter-Poza has joined a lawsuit against Trump brought by some whom he has blocked. Never mind that "blocking" someone on the

social media site doesn't mean they can't otherwise see your public tweets. But if you think that lawsuit is dumb, wait until you read Buckwalter-Poza's recent piece in *Fortune* headlined "Trump Blocked Me on Twitter and It's Costing Me My Career."

"Even though I knew @realDonaldTrump was important to my career," she writes, "it still took me at least a few days to recognize how being blocked by the president on Twitter would affect me as a public intellectual." (The first rule of being a public intellectual, by the way, is that if you have to call yourself one, you probably aren't.) It goes downhill from there:

> Not every tweet is a hit, but when I make a point pithily and it's liked and retweeted by thousands of people, some of the people who agree with my point or like the way I make it follow me or reach out. And some of those people are editors, experts, and advocates who become employers, contributors, and collaborators.

You read that right. Buckwalter-Poza is contending that being unable to directly mock the president's tweets on his own Twitter feed hampers her ability to impress her journalistic peers. It just goes to show what it takes to get ahead in the media game these days. ♦

Categorical Imperative

On the morning of Monday, July 17, we opened our copy of the *New York Times*, as we do most weekday mornings. Now, we're aware that Mondays aren't the best day for newspaper reading, because rarely is Sunday a big news day. But then again, you never know what you're going to miss, especially in the age of Trump.

So we opened the *Times*, and one of the first headlines we noticed was this: "China Is Preparing for New Top Leaders, Few of Them Women." It's a worthy story, even if the whole piece follows from the headline. (Though one does wonder: Are we to believe that antidemocratic Communist party rule would be somehow more palatable if a few more of the antidemocratic Communist party rulers were distaffian?)

Then there was this, from the obituary section: "Maryam Mirzakhani, 40, Only Woman to Win the 'Nobel Prize of Mathematics.'"

And this: "Hootie Johnson, 86; Fought Admission of Women at Masters Site."

Then, turning to the opinion page, we read an unsigned editorial, "Smoking Marijuana While Black,"

about how "black and Latino New Yorkers are far more likely to be arrested for smoking in public than whites, who are just as likely to use marijuana." It put us in mind of the old joke about a *New York Times* headline: "World Ends: Women, Minorities Hardest Hit."

But leave aside the merits or demerits of any of these stories. The Scrapbook simply wonders: On an ordinary day, when readers of the *Times* look out on the world, do they see anything but sociological categories? Or is it just on Mondays? ♦

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HORSE, CAMTONA

Long Playing

My wife and I are record collectors. At the moment, we own 1,151 of them (I have an app on my phone cataloguing the collection), and that number has been growing at a good clip. There's no real organizing principle—it's a diverse collection of rock, classical, jazz, soul, and even a fair bit of vintage country. We like to think the collection embodies our very sophisticated tastes, but no one is this dedicated to music without a love that is somewhat irrational. Hipsters might ooh and ahh over the Gang of Four record or an early pressing of David Bowie's *Man Who Sold the World*, but if you suggest there's a hint of irony behind, say, all those John Denver records on the shelf . . . well, we don't care what you think.

The collection originated with my wife, who never met a trend she was afraid to reject. When the rest of the world moved on to CDs, she kept buying records. When I met her, the fact that she was still carting around hundreds of cumbersome albums spoke to my own musical obsessions. It helped that back then records cost a pittance. The trade-off was the effort it took to find what you were looking for, whether it was driving across town to haunt garage sales in dodgy neighborhoods or digging through crates at flea markets. Naturally, the adventures were part of the fun—not to mention a great excuse to spend time with her.

If you live long enough, your quaint hobby is likely to become the cultural vanguard once more, and these days we're feeling pretty vindicated. Record collecting has taken off in a big way again. Many new albums are again being released on vinyl. This has upsides and downsides. The upside is that more record stores have been popping up—a terrific little shop, Crooked Beat Records, just opened in our suburban neighborhood, and antique malls are suddenly filling up with small collections for sale. The downside is that the proliferation of record shops is the result of vintage records exploding in value. I have seen battered copies of Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* for sale at upwards of $15, even though the record is so widely available I believe that ownership of it must have been mandatory in the late '70s.

JORI BOLTON

For a lot of people, the renewed popularity of vinyl is mystifying. But there are two compelling arguments for the superiority of vinyl. The first is the permanence of the object in an ephemeral culture. People who interact only with digital music tend to skip around and listen only to songs they like; they reject the form of the album, with its carefully curated collection of tracks, meant to be listened to sequentially. Large artwork, lyrics, and album credits enhance the experience. I like consulting the notes on the sleeve and knowing that my preference for certain Aretha Franklin recordings over others is easily explained by the fact that the legendary band from Muscle Shoals did the backing tracks. Spotify and iTunes reduce album covers to the size of a postage stamp and provide almost no information on how albums were recorded.

The second argument is technological. Recorded music is one of the few areas in which newer technology is demonstrably inferior. Sure, digital music is portable and convenient. But in the one area that should matter most—the actual sound—it falls short. In a nutshell, reducing sound waves to ones and zeros compresses certain frequencies. The frequencies eliminated are said to be outside the range of human hearing—but when you compare a CD to a well-calibrated record player, the sound is undeniably lifeless. Sure, in some superficial ways the record album may sound less pristine, but the revered British DJ John Peel put it this way: "Somebody was trying to tell me that CDs are better than vinyl because they don't have any surface noise. I said, 'Listen, mate, *life* has surface noise.'"

Lately, though, my wife and I have begun to wonder whether our passion for record collecting has become too consuming. The six-foot by six-foot shelving unit that houses our record collection is far and away the largest object in our tiny house. (This particular IKEA shelving is so cherished by record collectors, there was an online revolt when the Swedish furniture giant discontinued it a few years ago.) And then there are the hours and hours I have spent adjusting and repairing our fully automatic Pioneer turntable, which is older than I am.

But when all is said and done, record collecting gives more than it takes. Shortly before we were married, we embarked on what would become perennial reorganizations of our record collection. While shuffling through the albums, we both agreed that we liked the title of a particular Emmylou Harris record. A few years later, our first daughter was born. Every once in a while as I say her name, I find myself playing the song she's named after in my head: "Evangeline."

Mark Hemingway

the weekly Standard

Borrowed Time

Officials from the nations that signed the Iran nuclear deal discuss extending sanctions at a meeting in Vienna, January 2017.

Six months into its existence, the Trump administration seems unsure what its stance toward Iran ought to be. That's less because the current president and his advisers don't know what they think about Iran's leaders than because the previous president committed the United States to a reckless and credulous agreement—the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, by which the Iranians promised to forgo their nuclear ambitions in exchange for the removal of economic sanctions. The Islamic Republic never intended to keep its word, of course, as this magazine and many others repeatedly warned when the deal was signed. The Iranians have vastly exceeded the limits on advanced centrifuges and heavy water production imposed by the deal, and they won't give inspectors the access to the nuclear facilities required by the agreement.

President Trump has been appropriately skeptical of every claim out of Tehran, yet this week he chose to recertify Iran's compliance with the terms of the agreement. To their credit, administration officials show no inclination, as their predecessors in the Obama administration did, to expect the truth from a regime that brutalizes its citizens, funds terrorism around the world, and abets savagery in Syria. They assure us that the decision to recertify is best understood as a way to maintain diplomatic leverage with the other signatories of the deal (Britain, Germany, France, Russia, China, and the EU) while the administration formulates a comprehensive Iran policy. By saying two things at once—that Iran is in "technical compliance" with the nuclear deal and yet is "unquestionably in default of the spirit of the agreement," as national security adviser H.R. McMaster put it—the administration can buy time while it figures out the best way to deal with a rogue regime.

It's a defensible argument, but we're skeptical. The more time the administration takes, the more time Iran has to build a nuclear weapon and an accompanying delivery system. In any case, what sort of leverage does the Trump White House really think it can exercise with the deal's other parties? A nuclear Iran would diminish American influence in the Middle East and thus suit Russia and China just fine.

There are other, less defensible arguments for the president's reluctance to dismantle the nuclear agreement with Iran, as he promised he would during the campaign. One of those arguments, as Emanuele Ottolenghi reveals elsewhere in these pages, is jobs.

The easing of economic sanctions brought about by the 2015 nuclear deal opened a lucrative market to aerospace companies, and Boeing struck a $16.6 billion deal with the theretofore sanctioned Iran Air to build 80 passenger jets. (Its European rival, Airbus, agreed to sell 100 planes to Iran Air, and deliveries began in January.) Boeing had aggressively supported the Obama administration's negotiations. It argued that the agreement would spur the creation of thousands of jobs and promised that the planes it wished to sell to Iran would only be used for civilian air travel, per the agreement's terms.

The first of these arguments is suspect—though it's likely to appeal to Trump's "America First" instincts. Boeing has been laying off American workers and outsourcing its manufacturing; indeed the company announced hundreds of layoffs in April of this year, and in 2016 cut its workforce by a full 8 percent. Such is the folly of modern politicians' fixation on "jobs" rather than economic growth. It's far more politically beneficial to proclaim jobs numbers than it is to boast of long-term economic growth—even if the jobs a president or a governor boasts of having "created" or "saved" today are cut or moved overseas tomorrow.

The second and more serious argument, though, is utterly bogus. The Islamic Republic of Iran makes no distinction between civilian and military uses of its resources, and the regime's "civilian" passenger jets—as Ottolenghi

NEWSCOM

shows—have been routinely commandeered by the Iranian military to support the regime's proxy in Syria, Bashar al-Assad. Thus the Iran deal engineered by Barack Obama yields yet more ruin: As if it weren't bad enough that the deal enriched Iran's coffers, legitimized its brutality, and allowed it to work more conveniently toward nuclear capability, American wealth now facilitates the regime's support of butchery in Syria.

These revelations are appalling, but they were foreseeable. The naïveté that drove American policymakers to believe Iran would use its Western-purchased planes to transport tourists and businessmen and not brigades of armed militiamen was of a piece with the naïveté that drove them to think they could "decouple" Iran's nuclear ambitions from the regime's criminality. The absurdity of that delusion came to light again this week. Even as the Trump administration reluctantly agreed to validate Iran's compliance with the nuclear deal while making it clear that Iran has not complied, the country's foreign minister, Javad Zarif, accused the United States of violating the terms of the agreement—he was unclear on the details—and his government announced a 10-year sentence on an American citizen for "spying" when every indication suggests that Princeton history postgraduate Xiyue Wang was merely reading historical documents from the Qajar dynasty. No ordinary person would conclude that this is a government with which one would be wise to sign an accord.

"Never ever ever in my life have I seen any transaction so incompetently negotiated as our deal with Iran," Donald Trump said in 2015 when he was running for president. We couldn't agree more. But now it's in his power to do something about it, and so far he's deferring to advisers who'd prefer to wait—and then perhaps wait some more. While America buys time, Iran exports terror and steps ever closer to becoming a nuclear power. At some point, there will be no more time to buy. ♦

True American Greatness

On Friday, July 17, 2015, Donald Trump called me at the offices of The Weekly Standard. He wanted to tell me that even though I'd been critical of him, and indeed though I had said I couldn't imagine supporting him for president, he thought I'd been fairer and more open-minded about him than some other critics. He even said that he expected he'd bring me around to his candidacy. We had a cordial if insubstantial five-minute conversation, which ended with him saying he had to go because his plane was taking off for Iowa.

Senator John McCain with soldiers in Kabul, Afghanistan, on July 4, 2017

HAROON SABAWOON / ANADOLU AGENCY / GETTY

The next day in Iowa, Trump engaged in a colloquy with pollster Frank Luntz. In the course of this, Trump said of John McCain, "He is not a war hero." Luntz interjected, "He is a war hero." Trump persisted: "He is a war hero because he was captured." And he continued, "I like people that weren't captured, okay? I hate to tell you."

Controversy ensued. Trump refused to back down. I was on ABC's *This Week* the next day. I said, as I recall, that I judged Trump's remarks loathsome and unforgivable. I also predicted that they would doom his candidacy.

I was spectacularly wrong in my prediction. I was right in my judgment.

John McCain failed to win the Republican presidential nomination in 2000, and he failed to win the general election in 2008. In 2016 Donald Trump won both the nomination and the general election in his one and only try. Trump's conclusion from this is undoubtedly that he is a winner and McCain a loser.

But victories and losses are transient. Each sometimes goes to the undeserving. McCain's defeat followed eight years later by Trump's victory is a reminder of this fact of life.

Donald Trump is famous for his tweets. John McCain is not. But two weeks ago, on July 4, John McCain took to Twitter from Afghanistan (the 10th time in 11 years he has spent Independence Day with American troops abroad). McCain tweeted:

"Wonderful seeing so many outstanding American service members serving in #Afghanistan—we can't thank them enough for their sacrifice."

And he added: "It's always my special privilege to preside over the promotion & reenlistment of American troops serving in #Afghanistan."

The noble simplicity of sentiment in McCain's tweets is a world removed from Trump's gaudy and boastful displays. And McCain's demonstration of character and courage is a far more reliable guide to American greatness than the pronouncements of a president who speaks of it nonstop and embodies it not at all.

—William Kristol

Obamacare Lives

So what comes next on health care?

BY JOHN McCORMACK

The latest version of the Senate GOP's bill to partially repeal and replace Obamacare was pronounced dead the evening of Monday, July 17, when Utah senator Mike Lee and Kansas senator Jerry Moran announced their opposition, bringing the number of "no" votes to at least four. In a Senate that Republicans control 52-48, the bill could lose only two GOP votes and still pass, and Kentucky's Rand Paul and Maine's Susan Collins had already come out against it.

Each senator gave different reasons for opposing the bill, but put them all together and the message is that the legislation failed because it is too liberal for some senators, too conservative for others, deeply unpopular among the public, and written by Senate leadership in a closed and rushed process without any public hearings.

Where do things go from here on health care? No one knows. Here are five possibilities:

1. "Repeal-and-replace" resurrection. It's a tall order, but it's conceivable that eventually something resembling the Better Care Reconciliation Act passes the Senate and the House and is signed into law by President Donald Trump. Collins and Paul appear certain to oppose any version of this bill, so step one to getting 50 votes involves gaining Mike Lee's support, which doesn't look to be all that difficult. Lee said he'd vote for the bill if it included Texas senator Ted Cruz's "consumer freedom amendment," which would allow insurers that sell Obamacare-compliant plans to sell plans that don't adhere to Obamacare's costly regulations. The bill did include a modified version of the amendment that Cruz said was good enough to win his vote but Lee found unacceptable. The policy dispute is technical and complicated (the bill required a single insurance pool instead of one high-risk pool and another for everyone else).

If that specific policy dispute can be resolved, step two would involve spending enough money on Medicaid to assuage the concerns of moderate senators. Throughout the process, conservatives have made it clear that they would be willing to tolerate more spending and even keeping some of Obamacare's taxes on the wealthy to get regulatory relief that would re-create a real insurance market that brings down costs for middle-class Americans who don't have employer-sponsored insurance.

Even if conservatives and moderates compromise, wild cards like Moran would still need to be won over. And any successful vote would also depend upon the return to the Senate of John McCain, who was just diagnosed with brain cancer and is undergoing treatment in Arizona.

2. "Repeal-and-delay." Immediately after the bill failed, Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell announced that he would hold a vote on a bill passed by the Senate in 2015 that would repeal Obamacare's taxes and spending after a two-year delay. That "repeal-and-delay" bill repealed none of Obamacare's regulations, which conservatives correctly identify as the main problem driving up insurance costs. So if the subsidies were to vanish, it would become impossible for millions more working-class and middle-class Americans to purchase health insurance.

The idea behind this plan is that scheduling a crisis two years down the road will force Congress to act in the next year. In recent years, Congress has only acted when forced to do so by looming catastrophes, but the problem with "repeal-and-delay" is that it's unlikely that scheduling a GOP-created health care crisis for 2019 would result in a compromise any better than the deal that just failed to address the ongoing health care crisis that was created by Democrats in 2010.

The experience of the last six months suggests "repeal-and-delay" would not compel 50 Republicans to agree on anything, and Republicans tend to fare poorly in bipartisan negotiations to avert crises (as you may recall from the debt-limit standoff of 2011, the "fiscal cliff" of 2012, and the government shutdown of 2013).

Repeal-and-delay was the original plan of GOP congressional leadership, but it was scuttled after center-right experts raised concerns that it could further destabilize health insurance markets and conservatives said it was

BRITT SPENCER

John McCormack is a senior writer at THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

unacceptable. “I just spoke to @realDonaldTrump and he fully supports my plan to replace Obamacare the same day we repeal it,” Kentucky senator Rand Paul tweeted on January 6.

Paul has flip-flopped on the plan and now backs repeal-and-delay, along with other conservatives in the Senate. But after six months of failed health care negotiations, “repeal-and-delay” sounds a lot more like “the dog ate my homework.” At least three moderates have come out against it, and its passage seems even less likely than repeal-and-replace’s resurrection.

3. A small bill. If repeal-and-replace and repeal-and-delay both fizzle, there’s a chance Republicans could compromise on a more modest piece of legislation. Senators Bill Cassidy of Louisiana and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina have proposed encouraging more health care experimentation among the states, essentially expanding a provision that already exists in Obamacare. Some conservative critics say this is faux federalism, because the plan would still force states to follow Obamacare’s most onerous regulations.

The editors of *National Review* have suggested a different kind of small bill. “Republicans seem to be able to achieve near-unity on ending the individual mandate, allowing insurers to offer discounts for younger people, protecting taxpayers from having to subsidize abortion coverage, and giving states some freedom to relax regulations. They should work for legislation that achieves these goals and includes as much Medicaid reform as 50 senators are prepared to tolerate,” read a July 18 editorial. “Republicans should not claim that such legislation would repeal and replace Obamacare, since it would not, and should make it clear that additional legislation will be needed in the future.”

4. Bipartisan bailout. On July 18, Tennessee GOP senator Lamar Alexander, chairman of the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, issued a statement saying he would “hold hearings to continue exploring how to stabilize the individual market.” The “repeal-and-replace” bill already includes a “stability fund” (also known as a bailout) that conservatives were willing to swallow as part of a transition away from Obamacare.

But as a standalone measure, the politics of a bailout are downright ugly on the right. “Until Senate Republicans demonstrate a willingness to come together and work with their colleagues to repeal and replace Obamacare, the near-term fight is to block a bailout of this failing law,” Heritage Action’s Mike Needham said in response to Alexander’s statement. “Make no mistake, when lawmakers call for ‘bipartisan market stabilization’ they mean more taxpayer money and more regulations. That approach is unacceptable.” Even Texas senator John Cornyn, the majority whip, opposed this approach. “I personally will not be part of any bailout of insurance companies without reform,” he said on the Senate floor on July 18.

Conservatives have made it clear that they would be willing to tolerate more spending and even keeping some of Obamacare’s taxes on the wealthy to get regulatory relief that would re-create a real insurance market that brings down costs for middle-class Americans who don’t have employer-sponsored insurance.

The fear of some conservatives is that such a bailout would be attached to bipartisan, must-pass legislation to fund the government. A standalone bailout is toxic enough for small-government conservatives, but it would cross a red line for pro-lifers if Democrats insisted on a new funding stream that was not subject to the Hyde Amendment, a prohibition on federal funding of elective abortion and insurance plans that cover elective abortion. Few Republicans in Congress would want to start a civil war with the pro-life movement in order to pass a bailout.

5. Nothing. Yes, nothing. It’s entirely possible that no legislation affecting Obamacare is passed by the 115th Congress and signed into law. “I think we’re probably in that position where we’ll let Obamacare fail,” President Trump said on July 18. “We’re not going to own it. I’m not going to own it. I can tell you the Republicans are not going to own it.”

Trump might be wrong about the politics—voters probably won’t let him and congressional Republicans off the hook for failing to fulfill seven years of campaign promises to repeal Obamacare. And though the leadership and rank-and-file of the GOP in Congress will bear plenty of blame for not hashing out their differences and selling their ideas, so too will the Republican president bear blame for not having a basic understanding of health care policy and for changing his opinions on matters of strategy and substance on a day-to-day basis. Trump not only failed to use the bully pulpit to persuade the American people, he actively undermined efforts to repeal Obamacare—recall Trump’s calling the House bill “mean” days after urging Congress to pass it. Still, doing nothing might be the most likely response at this point.

The law would, of course, continue to fail: As the *New York Times* reported on June 9, there are 45 counties where no insurers plan to offer policies on the Obamacare exchanges next year. It’s a real problem, but Jim Capretta of the American Enterprise Institute points out that “it’s a small number” of consumers in those 45 counties, and the government will “end up muscling the insurers to cover those people.” “The other problem is the places where there’s only one insurer,” Capretta told The Weekly Standard. “That’s one-third of the country or so.” So even as Republicans try to take up tax reform and other issues, they would be dogged month after month about insurers leaving the market and premiums skyrocketing for middle-class Americans.

Republicans may desperately want to move on from health care, but health care will not move on from them. ♦

‘Extremely Unfair’

Agita in the Oval Office.

BY MICHAEL WARREN

Donald Trump is angry and frustrated with the federal investigation into Russian meddling in our election. In his view, the inquiry doesn’t just call into question the legitimacy of his election. Now he feels his own family is a target and under siege. Trump blames the highest-ranking members of his Department of Justice for this state of affairs, and he granted an interview last week to the “failing” *New York Times* (as he likes to call it) to complain publicly.

When Trump sat down with three *Times* reporters in the Oval Office on July 19, news of the ongoing Russia controversy was unusually quiet. For the preceding 48 hours or so, the White House had been dealing with a more ordinary crisis: the collapse of Obamacare repeal in the Republican-controlled Senate. The White House had been working hard to figure out how to revive the Senate’s health care bill. Just before his interview with the paper, Trump attended a lunch with GOP senators to discuss prospects for repealing Obamacare.

But it was his thoughts and views on the Russia investigation, not health care, that the president sought to get out in the open. “I have done nothing wrong,” he said. “A special counsel should never have been appointed in this case.” Who did the president blame for that? His attorney general, Jeff Sessions, whose decision in March to recuse himself from any Justice Department probe into Russian interference and potential Trump campaign collusion continues to infuriate the president.

“Well, Sessions should have never recused himself, and if he was going to recuse himself, he should have told me before he took the job, and I would have picked somebody else,” Trump said. “How do you take a job and then recuse yourself? If he would have recused himself before the job, I would have said, ‘Thanks, Jeff, but I can’t, you know, I’m not going to take you.’ It’s extremely unfair, and that’s a mild word, to the president.”

Happier times: Sessions’s swearing-in

NEWSCOM

The president wasn’t done airing his grievances. He mused about how Sessions “hardly knew” his deputy attorney general, Rod Rosenstein, and complained that Rosenstein was from Baltimore, where there are “very few Republicans.” (Rosenstein, a Philadelphia native, had been the U.S. attorney in Maryland for 12 years before becoming Sessions’s deputy.)

Trump insinuated that the special counsel’s investigation was corrupt. He mentioned that he had interviewed Robert Mueller, a former FBI director, for the director’s job on May 16, after firing James Comey. In their Oval Office meeting, which the president says included Rosenstein (to whom the FBI director reports), Mueller supposedly expressed interest in taking over the FBI.

“The next day, he is appointed special counsel,” Trump said. “I said, what the hell is this all about? Talk about conflicts.” Because of Sessions’s recusal, it fell to Rosenstein to appoint the special counsel.

Finally, Trump, when pressed, offered a warning to Mueller to stay within the scope of the investigation. Asked whether or not a probe into Trump and his family’s finances would be a “breach” of the scope of the special counsel’s investigation, he said it would be a “violation.” And would Trump fire Mueller if his investigation did start looking into the Trump family’s business and financial dealings? “I can’t answer that question because I don’t think it’s going to happen,” Trump said.

But it is happening. Mueller’s investigators are “examining a broad range of transactions involving Trump’s businesses as well as those of his associates,” Bloomberg reported the next day, July 20. A spokesman for the special counsel’s office, Joshua Stueve, declined to comment on the report but did point THE WEEKLY STANDARD back to the original authorization by Rosenstein. That order charges the special counsel with investigating “any links and/or coordination between the Russian government and individuals associated with the campaign of President Donald Trump.” And it’s not just Trump’s finances. The now-infamous June 2016 meeting between a Kremlin-linked lawyer and Donald Trump Jr. has drawn the attention of Mueller’s team.

So what happens next? To fire Mueller, Trump would have to persuade Rosenstein to do so or fire Rosenstein as well. Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the deputy White House press secretary, told reporters on July 20 that Trump “does not intend” to fire Mueller “at this time.” And in contradiction of Trump’s own words in the *Times* interview, Sanders said the president “has confidence in [Sessions] or he would not be the attorney general.”

In a press conference on July 20, Sessions showed no eagerness to leave his post. “I have the honor of serving as attorney general,” he said. “We love this job, we love this department, and I plan to continue to do so as long as that is appropriate.” Sessions had reportedly offered his resignation in the weeks after Trump fired Comey at the FBI, but Trump did not accept it. DoJ spokeswoman Sarah Isgur Flores

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did not respond to questions about whether Sessions has since offered to resign again.

Where all this leaves the administration and the White House is in a state of confusion and flux. If Trump's words were meant to prompt the resignations he wants, the gambit has so far failed. If the president intends to act on the frustration he chose to express to the *Times* by firing the leadership of the Justice Department that is investigating his associates and his family, he risks more than just political fallout and bad publicity—Trump could trigger a constitutional crisis. ♦

The Vision Thing

Democrats have it, Republicans don't.

BY JAY COST

The effort by congressional Republicans to repeal and replace Obamacare hit a major roadblock last week, as GOP senators on the left and right sides of the caucus declared their opposition to majority leader Mitch McConnell's latest proposal. It is hard to blame them for their unease. Obamacare was a hodgepodge of half-measures and false starts, but compared with the GOP alternatives it looks like a masterpiece of symmetry and sophistication.

There is a natural inclination to blame particular individuals for this failure. Many theories abound. McConnell did not write a good bill. Conservatives like Mike Lee and libertarians like Rand Paul were unwilling to take half a loaf. Moderates like Lisa Murkowski were unwilling to follow through on the promises they made when Barack Obama was president. And so on.

Without discounting these theories, it is important not to overlook the bigger picture. Namely, the GOP has proven itself over the years to be a poor vehicle for entitlement reform. While the party can generally be relied upon to oppose the statist ambitions of liberal Democrats, it still lacks "the vision thing," as George H.W. Bush famously put it. The Republican party does not have a clear, salable view of what entitlements should do in our society,

THOMAS FLUHARTY

or how they should do them. Little wonder, then, that the effort to offer an alternative to Obamacare has been mostly incoherent.

Our entitlement system has at least four major defects. First, benefits flow to people who really should be able to take care of themselves. This was a key complaint about the Obamacare expansion of Medicaid, whose initial purpose was to supply a backstop for the indigent and their dependents. Similarly, Medicare and Social Security were created when seniors were the most impoverished age cohort; now the oldest Americans are also the wealthiest, yet their benefit levels have increased over the years.

Second, providing benefits to the wealthy or able-bodied discourages good habits like thrift and hard work. For instance, many voters are under the mistaken impression that their contributions to Medicare and Social Security cover the full scope of benefits they eventually receive, which discourages saving for retirement and puts more pressure on the state.

Third, the design of many entitlements reflects old political calculations, rather than the most efficient way to transmit necessary benefits. The most extreme example of this is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which is housed in the Agriculture Department—mainly for political purposes. In the 1960s a logroll between urban and rural members of Congress yoked food stamps to farm subsidies and placed the entire edifice in the USDA to secure the bargain. Moreover, Medicare was a program of runaway spending from its earliest days in part because the original law created an open-ended commitment that massively inflated costs. The effects of this fateful decision linger to this day.

Fourth, our entitlements invest undue political power in mediating interest groups. The government does not provide benefits directly, and so employs private parties, which in turn acquire power to influence the government. For instance, the doctors' lobby, which initially opposed Medicare back in 1965, is so ingrained in the system that it now writes upwards of 90 percent of the reimbursement rates for Part B. This institutionalization of conflicts of interests increases the costs of entitlements and corrupts the republican character of our government.

Entitlement reform, in theory, would be an effort to ameliorate such problems for all of the major federal entitlements—not just Obamacare, but Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, veterans' benefits, unemployment insurance, and the smaller forms of subsidy. The approach might need to be piecemeal, but the goal would be constant movement toward a system that dispenses benefits in a more rational manner, aiding those who need it while keeping costs to taxpayers low and minimizing the incidence of corruption.

Jay Cost is a senior writer at THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

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- Kirkus Reviews

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Such an effort would have to include a pedagogical function, as well. The average voter does not understand how entitlement programs work, much less how they fail to work. So a call for reform will inevitably fall upon deaf ears unless accompanied by a public relations campaign.

All else being equal, this could be a bipartisan effort. After all, there is nothing inherently objectionable about distributing government benefits in a fair and sensible manner. But the devil is in the details. Modern conservatives and liberals disagree on what constitutes genuine need. The technocratic know-it-alls at the top of the progressive architecture seem intent on promoting dependence on the government, and by extension on themselves. And the partisan effort to expand the welfare state requires progressives to elide the inefficiencies of the current system. That leaves the Republican party as the only reform game in town.

Unfortunately, the GOP has proven not to be up to this challenge. While there are a handful of Republicans—House speaker Paul Ryan comes to mind—who have seriously pursued entitlement reform, it is a message that, as a whole, the party has not advanced. Quite the opposite, in fact. While campaigning for president, Donald Trump promised *not* to cut Medicare and Social Security, suggesting the programs could be brought into line by trimming waste, fraud, and abuse, and promoting economic growth. This is simply not the case.

More broadly, Republican efforts to reform entitlements—halting as they have been—seem inevitably conjoined to an effort to cut taxes. In the early 1980s, when federal income tax rates were burdening the middle class, this could be seen as a populist position: Let's help the working man take home more of his pay, and insist that nobody free-rides on Uncle Sam. But federal taxes have been cut repeatedly in the intervening decades, making it almost impossible to cut them more without primarily aiding the wealthy. This is about the worst possible message, from a public-relations angle, as it makes Republicans look like Robin Hood in reverse.

It would be understating the scope of this failure to suggest it is a problem of bad salesmanship. Republicans have little to sell, anyway. Far from spearheading a comprehensive effort to bring our Frankensteinian welfare state to heel, the party cannot even get the small stuff right. Conservative policy experts have done good research on health care in recent years—no doubt spurred by their dissatisfaction with Obamacare—but the congressional GOP seems to have largely ignored their endeavors. The repeal-and-replace plan the House produced was met with groans of disappointment from conservative policy wonks, and the Senate alternative fared little better. Now that the repeal-and-replace initiative has run aground, one would think that smaller reforms would be in the offing—but one would be wrong. The GOP is simply not up to this relatively narrow task.

In sum, the Republican party is generally not serious about entitlement reform. This explains why, despite the resurgence of the party's political fortunes in the last 40 years, it has mostly left the system intact—the welfare reform of 1996 being a notable exception. When confronted with an opportunity for reform, the party more often undertakes initiatives that expand and entrench the current regime. This creates a vicious cycle: Halting and equivocal in its efforts, the party fails to educate the electorate on the need for reform, which encourages wavering legislators to hedge all the more.

What is needed is a GOP that is as committed to reforming entitlements as the Democrats are to expanding them. Democrats knew, in 2009-2010, that Obamacare was politically unpopular and might undermine their personal political aspirations. But many of them voted for it, anyway. Why? Because expanding federal benefits is embedded in the DNA of their party and is a central element of the modern progressive's self-conception. Republicans have no such core conviction, and it shows. ♦

All in the (Presidential) Family

Of first siblings and first children.

BY PHILIP TERZIAN

Opinions may vary about Donald Trump Jr., but nearly all can agree that his meeting with the mysterious Natalia Veselnitskaya—and two or four or seven other people in Trump Tower last summer—has done his father no good. I plead agnosticism on this particular case, tending to conclude that it affirms the Trump presidential campaign's status as the most bumptious and chaotic since George McGovern's 45 years ago. But it also reminds us that presidents, as well as presidential candidates, can choose their staff and confidants but cannot choose their families.

The past, in this instance, is a contradictory guide. Some very good modern presidents—Franklin D. Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan—have yielded less-than-stellar children; while some less-than-stellar presidents—William Howard Taft, Lyndon B. Johnson—produced admirable offspring. Raised involuntarily in history's goldfish bowl, most modern presidential children have tended to pursue a respectable low profile—John Coolidge, the Wilson daughters, John Eisenhower, the Ford brood—endeavoring to avoid embarrassing their parents and doing no damage to their fathers' reputations. Others—Margaret Truman, Ron Reagan, Chelsea Clinton—have embraced their celebrity status, with mixed results.

Yet when it comes to familial headaches, it is siblings rather than children who have tended to do genuine harm. The reasons are not especially difficult to guess: Presidential children tend to be raised in a political environment and imbibe certain lessons that can keep them out of trouble. Presidents, however, are usually family outliers and distant from brothers and sisters in pertinent ways. Dwight D. Eisenhower was one of six brothers, all of whom found success separate from Ike's career. The same can be said of Harry Truman's younger brother and sister and Ronald Reagan's older brother, none of whom were ever cause for brotherly concern.

Billy Carter, left, shakes hands with the mayor of Tripoli during a 1978 trip to Libya.

Sam Houston Johnson, author

The Kennedy siblings were insulated by wealth, or junior partners in the family political firm. The sisters and brothers of George H.W. Bush—and Bush's children, for that matter—have only added luster, in varying degrees, to the family name.

Jimmy Carter, however, was not so fortunate. Carter had two sisters, one of whom was a mildly colorful Georgia matron who rode a motorcycle; the other was an evangelical "healer" whose most famous convert during her brother's presidency was the pornographer Larry Flynt—who swiftly relapsed. Neither sister, however, was ever likely to have caused sleeplessness in the White House. The same cannot be said of younger brother Billy. Manager of the family peanut business and proprietor of a ramshackle gas station in Plains, Billy Carter, with a Marine pedigree and good-ol'-boy persona, was initially embraced by the press as "colorful" copy.

Billy's escalating alcoholic antics, however, and his willingness to profit from Jimmy's position took a sinister turn. During 1978-79, he undertook a series of well-publicized visits to Colonel Qaddafi's Libya, was obliged to register with the federal government as a foreign agent, and became the subject of a (Democratic) congressional investigation into influence-peddling. This yielded a statement from his sibling unmatched in the annals of presidential mortification: "Billy has had no influence on U.S. policy or actions concerning Libya in the past," declared President Carter, "and he will have no influence in the future."

Richard Nixon suffered from an errant sibling as well. Younger brother Donald was a serially unprofitable businessman in California, and when it became known during the 1960 presidential campaign that, three years earlier, he had pocketed a $205,000 loan from the secretive financier Howard Hughes—intended to shore up a drive-in restaurant in Whittier that

ABOVE, SAN DIEGO UNION / AP; BELOW, BETTMAN / CORBIS / GETTY

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featured the "Nixonburger"—the Hughes loan became a minor scandal in his brother's candidacy.

Given the narrowness of candidate Nixon's loss to Kennedy that year, President Nixon might well have believed that the Hughes loan was decisive. Or so my own theory of Watergate would suggest. When, in the early 1970s, it became known that a onetime Hughes associate named Robert Maheu was conferring with Lawrence O'Brien, chairman of the Democratic National Committee (as a baby DNC staffer I had witnessed Maheu's coming and goings), the impulse to prevent a new Hughes scandal in 1972 could easily have prompted the Nixon White House to bug the DNC.

Not all black sheep lead to scandal, of course: Some, like Lyndon Johnson's younger brother Sam Houston, are merely embarrassing. Sam Houston Johnson, a lawyer, spent most of his career as a staffer and fix-it man in Texas for his brother in Washington. But like Billy Carter, Sam Houston drank too much—and by the time LBJ had become president, his brother's misbehavior had grown so acute that Johnson required Sam Houston to live in the White House, where he could be monitored.

In due course, this presidential vote of no-confidence produced a response. In 1970, Sam Houston published a volume entitled *My Brother Lyndon* that, while largely benign, contained enough bile about the thin-skinned LBJ to cause an estrangement.

Among presidential memoirs, *My Brother Lyndon* is a particular favorite of mine—partly for an incident related to Sam Houston's publicity tour. Appearing one evening on David Frost's TV talk show, Sam Houston was asked to comment on a passage (read aloud by Frost) where the author complained about his chronic inability to penetrate his brother's army of "sycophants." Before he could respond, Sam Houston explained, Frost would have to tell him what "sycophant" meant.

Let that be a lesson to ghostwriters everywhere. ♦

Harvard Finds a Scapegoat

Exclusive clubs aren't the problem; excessive drinking is.

BY NAOMI SCHAEFER RILEY

BARRY CHIN / THE BOSTON GLOBE / GETTY

Rebecca Ramos, a member of Harvard's class of 2017, addresses more than 200 women protesting the university's targeting of single-gender clubs, May 9, 2016.

It looks like the finale for the final clubs. A Harvard faculty committee released a report last week recommending that all fraternities, sororities, and similarly "exclusionary" single-sex social organizations be phased out by the spring of 2022. The committee determined that it would not be enough for these organizations to go co-ed; the campus must be rid of them completely.

Harvard withdrew official recognition of final clubs decades ago, but last year the administration went further, declaring that their members would not be able to hold leadership positions on campus or receive the recommendations required for some postgraduate fellowships and scholarships, including the Rhodes Scholarship.

The absurdity of the recommendation to eliminate them was not lost on outside observers: How can Harvard, of all places, tell students not to join exclusive institutions? But many faculty—not to mention students and alumni—say such a policy would also be an unnecessary breach of students' freedom. As psychology professor Steven Pinker wrote recently, "A university is an institution with circumscribed responsibilities which engages in a contract with its students. Its main responsibility is to provide them with an education. It is not an arbiter over their lives, 24/7." As the folks at the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education point out, Harvard is clearly violating promises of freedom of association it's made to its students over the years.

These are good points, but what's

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particularly strange about this recommendation is that it makes almost no mention of the reason Harvard president Drew Faust and Harvard College dean Rakesh Khurana wanted to reexamine the role of final clubs on campus in the first place. In the spring of 2016, the school released a report regarding sexual assault on campus, which concluded that the all-male clubs deserved a disproportionate share of the blame.

According to Harvard's survey, 47 percent of female college seniors "participating in the Final Clubs"—that is, attending male final club events or belonging to female final clubs—reported "experiencing nonconsensual sexual contact since entering college." The same was true of only 31 percent of all seniors. The report concluded that "a Harvard College woman is half again more likely to experience sexual assault if she is involved with a Club than the average female Harvard College Senior." The clubs are bastions of "sexual entitlement," troubling areas of potential alcohol abuse and sexual assault, and a "vestige of gender inequity" on campus.

So what happened? Why didn't the committee simply force the final clubs to go co-ed and call it a day? Well, the committee's report includes testimony from students who say that unpopular kids feel bad when they are not chosen for these clubs and poorer kids feel bad because they don't have tuxedos to wear to final club events and can't afford the expectations that come with membership.

In other words, simply making the clubs co-ed wasn't checking enough privilege. "Our main reservation about the stated goal of the policy was whether the focus on ending gender segregation and discrimination is too narrow," the report reads. "If all of these organizations adopted gender-neutral membership in a timely fashion, there would remain a myriad of practices of these organizations that go against the educational mission and principles espoused by Harvard University."

But doing away with the clubs won't solve any of the problems faculty and administration set out to address. Not only will Harvard always be an exclusive institution, there will always be gradations within it. There will always be students who skip the cafeteria lines and spend their weekends trying out trendy new restaurants in Cambridge and Boston. During vacations, some will ski in Europe and sun themselves on Maui. Some will even find places to wear their tuxedos. Harvard can offer free tuition and subsidize summer internships, but it is presumably not going to guarantee that everyone has a summer place on Nantucket.

As for the original issue of curbing sexual assault, the university has been misguided from the beginning. The survey the university conducted, which again was the impetus for changing the final club policy, was badly written and poorly analyzed. The questions themselves were deeply confusing. "Since you have been a student at Harvard University has a student or someone employed by or otherwise associated with Harvard . . . continued to ask you to go out, get dinner, have drinks or have sex even though you said no?" If you answered yes to that question, you were counted as a victim of sexual assault.

Though there is almost no mention of it earlier in the report, there is a table at the end titled "Percent of Female Victims of Nonconsensual Penetration Involving Physical Force or Incapacitation by Involvement of Substances and Tactic." In almost two-thirds of cases involving physical force, the victim was voluntarily drinking alcohol; in another 4 percent of cases, the victim was voluntarily using drugs. In these cases, 69 percent of the offenders were drinking and 5 percent were using drugs.

From the similarity of these numbers, you might think that the victims and offenders were drinking or doing drugs together before they engaged in sexual activity. This gets to the heart of the problem on Harvard's campus and many others these days: The drinking culture has gone off the rails. Students are not exercising good judgment regarding sexual encounters because many of them are too drunk to do so.

While overall alcohol use among young adults has not changed much since the 1970s, there has been a shift on the extreme end of the spectrum. According to a 2013 report in *JAMA Pediatrics* on high school seniors, "On occasion, 10.5% consumed 10 to 14 drinks, and 5.6% consumed 15 drinks or more." In every recent account of life on campus, men and especially women describe "pre-gaming," that is, getting tipsy before they even leave

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their dorm rooms. For women, this is often so that they can shed their inhibitions and behave like men (also known as "empowerment").

It would be nice to think that getting rid of some off-campus locations for drunken sex would solve these issues, but the truth is that it will not even make a dent. Like most colleges, Harvard is not serious about fixing its drinking problem, let alone its message that young women have achieved equality when they act like men. Declaring that you are going to take on the campus rape crisis sounds much sexier. College administrators don't want to seem like old fogies trying to curb something as frivolous as a few extra beers. And heaven forbid they consider the problems of co-ed dormitories and bathrooms.

"Time after time," according to the committee, "the social organizations have demonstrated . . . unwillingness to change—even as new students join them over generations." Truthfully, though, it is the administration that has demonstrated a stubborn inability to see what is in front of it. If students want to be snobbishly selective in some ways while getting too drunk to be discriminating in others, the modern college campus affords them plenty of opportunities. ♦

French Adoption

The unpredictable effects of American-style primaries. BY GARY SCHMITT & REBECCA BURGESS

As President Macron and President Trump stood side by side during the Bastille Day ceremonies in Paris, it was not difficult for commentators to point out the differences between the two men. Neither in personal style nor substantive policies do they have much in common. Indeed, Macron's victory in early May was seen by most as a firm and critical rejection of Trump-style politics by a major Western country. But Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron do in fact share one very important characteristic: They were both candidates who came seemingly out of nowhere and who owe their victories in no small measure to a selection system that has reduced the sway of traditional party structures and allowed them to take advantage of fractures within the parties.

While the French have been intrigued by the drama of American presidential primaries for decades, the use of an open primary to choose a candidate is relatively new there. Its ultimate adoption was tied to the example of Barack Obama's 2008 run for the Oval Office and his successful primary campaign waged against favored Hillary Clinton. Taking note of the Obama team's grassroots efforts and digital strategy to expand partisan recruitment, the newly formed French think tank Terra Nova dreamed of creating similar conditions, to produce "un Barack Obama français."

With this goal in mind, Terra Nova organized a trip to Washington in early 2009 for Socialist party politicians and operatives, meeting Obama campaign staff and strategists from the Center for American Progress. Former governor and insurgent presidential candidate Howard Dean that same year held a meeting for progressives in Paris, passing along the "secret" of Democratic strategy for expanding numbers among its electorate: Get volunteers to participate in primary campaigns.

With its August 2008 report "Pour une primaire à la Française," Terra Nova had already proposed adoption of an open primary. It argued that such a reform was more than politically expedient. Adopting an open primary system was the natural outgrowth of a central feature of the Fifth Republic, the French practice of direct election of the president—a practice established by Charles de Gaulle in 1962 as a way to work around perceived political paralysis and cement the institutional strength of the executive against the power of the National Assembly. If it was the right of the French people to choose their president, it stood to reason that it was also their right to choose who the candidates for that office would be. The primary system would finally align party rules with the French presidential regime—or so it was argued.

Constitutional theories aside, the Socialists also believed that in advance of the 2012 presidential election, an open primary system would boost their electoral chances. The French left was worried that shared socioeconomic interests could no longer be counted on to rally a majority to their candidate, requiring them to stitch together a broader agenda of "cultural, progressive values" cutting across particular groups such as women, young people, minorities, and the highly educated, much as Obama did in the United States. Targeting these groups would produce new or reengaged voters for the party, but only if they were given a further role in the electoral process.

But even as outside political and social realities seemed to be rendering the traditional Socialist platform less relevant, paralyzing internal party politics were likewise propelling the Socialists towards an open primary as a permanent feature. After Lionel Jospin lost his bid to succeed President François Mitterrand in 1995, Socialist party officials had struggled to pick a party leader or a winning presidential candidate. In 2006, Ségolène Royal emerged victorious in an ad-hoc Socialist primary, hastily put together when the party could not reach a consensus over which of the two leading candidates, Dominique Strauss-Kahn or Laurent Fabius, should be chosen.

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Employing a media-centric campaign, the relatively unknown Royal entered the race and won the Socialist-only primary. But in the wake of her loss to Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007, and Obama's victory in 2008, the Socialists doubled down on their commitment to the primary system, adopting rules to open their primary not only to party members but to all "adherents" (members of other left-wing parties) and to members of the general public who were registered in the French electoral lists. To vote, all one had to do was make a minimum contribution of one euro and sign a statement affirming the values of the left: "freedom, equality, fraternity, secularism, justice, solidarity and progress."

Though not the initial favorite, François Hollande won the first open Socialist primary in 2011, out of a field of six candidates. He took advantage of the scandals sinking Strauss-Kahn and veered sharply to the populist left, posing as the adversary of "the world of finance." Hollande's strategy was given a considerable lift when Terra Nova's prediction that an open primary would increase electoral participation came true: Approximately 2.5 million people cast ballots in the 2011 primary, more than a tenfold increase over 2006. His primary win was credited with giving him a popular boost that extended well beyond Socialist circles and helped produce his presidential victory. "The primary gave [Hollande] the aura of a winner, which he never had before," a party official noted—and thus the notion of a "primary premium" took hold within French politics.

Meanwhile, the internal divisions of the French center-right party, the Union for a Popular Movement or UMP—soon to become les Républicains—were also leading them to the logic of the "primary premium." The divisions had stemmed from Sarkozy's 2012 loss to Hollande and his subsequent retirement from public life. Sarkozy reentered public life in 2014, sensing another shot at the presidency in the combined circumstances of a deeply unpopular President Hollande and the general disarray within the political right. But Sarkozy's maneuvers ran into demands by competing party leaders Alain Juppé and François Fillon for an open primary selection system. Both believed that Sarkozy's sway over the party's machinery would prevent a fair race.

Peas in a pod?

NEWSCOM

Sarkozy initially resisted the demands. But absent the broad consensus he had enjoyed when he previously captured the party's nomination, and confronted with the serious challenge posed by Juppé and Fillon, Sarkozy could hardly refuse letting a wider electorate have its say. Moreover, there was now the prospect of obtaining the same kind of "primary premium" that had helped propel Hollande to victory in the general election. Sarkozy capitulated and agreed that the Républicains would also hold their first open primary. The stakes were high: Most observers believed that whoever won this primary would win the French presidency in 2017.

The Républicains' primary was officially called the primary of "the Right and Center." No party membership card was required, though participants had to provide their name and address, pay a token two euros, and, like voters on the left, sign a statement that they shared the "political values of the Right and Center." Each potential candidate had to obtain the support of 20 members of the National Assembly, 2,500 party members, and 250 elected representatives to appear on the ballot. Meeting this relatively low bar, seven candidates appeared on the ballots on November 20, 2016, the first stage of the two-stage primary.

After four million votes were cast, Fillon had come out on top. Seemingly copying Hollande's strategy from 2011 by campaigning further to his party's extreme than what his political history would have suggested, Fillon ran as a Thatcherite-style reformer and took more than 44 percent of the primary vote, with Sarkozy coming in a distant third at 21 percent. In the second round of voting, Fillon won two to one over Juppé. The right's primary experiment thus produced a candidate representing the most rightward edge of the coalition.

This drift towards the extremes was reflected in the left's primary as well. Ordinarily, the Socialists would not have held a presidential primary when the sitting president was of their party. But with Hollande's approval within the party at an all-time low and in single digits nationally, he had little choice but to agree to a primary contest before ultimately deciding to bow out of the race altogether—becoming the first presidential incumbent in the Fifth Republic not to run for reelection. After two rounds of primary voting in January 2017, the left's candidate was the hard-left Benoît Hamon, whose signature proposals were adopting a 32-hour workweek, instituting a universal basic income, and legalizing cannabis.

Emmanuel Macron, a former Hollande minister responsible for several of the president's unpopular reforms, had no chance of winning the left's primary. But he judged that with the two traditional parties simultaneously veering further right and left, there was room to capture the middle. Macron's assessment of this moment in French politics in fact ran deeper than that. He suggested that France's traditional political division of right and left, whose roots arguably reached back to 1789 and the French Revolution, had collapsed into irrelevancy in the face of modern technology and globalism. He was certain that the contemporary political ideological divide rested on the fault line between those in favor of globalism, trade, markets, an open society, and "more Europe" and their opposites—nationalists advocating protectionism, both culturally and in trade.

He also thought that France's political problems were bound up with the lost "mystique" of the presidential office. De Gaulle filled that void

only for a time through his outsized personality and political style. The suggestion was that the leadership of France's president needed to be as much about the particular officeholder's charisma as it was about the nominal authorities of the office.

Macron gambled that the new open primaries were the death rattle of the traditional parties rather than a resuscitation of them, and that by moving to the extremes of the political spectrum, both left and right were creating the conditions for a new movement "above parties" to take hold in the political center. Tellingly, he founded his own movement—not a political party—to back his presidential bid. He remained vague about how exactly he would overcome the tensions between the center-right and center-left where his would-be majority lay. As a result, his campaign was as much about the person Macron as about his campaign pledges.

The presidential election confirmed Macron's intuition about the state of France's parties: No candidate from a traditional party advanced to the second round of voting. But it was not his political acuity alone that propelled Macron to victory—he was immensely helped by the late-breaking financial scandal that neutralized Fillon. This left Macron to face the hyper-populist Marine Le Pen of the National Front, whom Macron easily defeated, as the French political class and the voting public rallied to him in their determination to defeat her.

Opposition to Le Pen is, however, only half a program. Now an official party, Macron's *En Marche!* movement won an absolute majority in the National Assembly elections in mid-June. Its task will be to turn oxymoronic characterizations of the party as representing the "radical center" or as a "progressive party of both the right and the left" into coherent policies. The new French president's charisma may indeed assist him in moving policies forward but how far and how long it will carry him is another question. The fact that French citizens abstained from voting in the legislative elections at a nearly 60-year high suggests Macron and his movement's victory rests on shaky ground.

More deeply, if the hope in adopting open primaries was to sidestep the parties' internal squabbling and leadership fights, their adoption—as in the United States—appears to have just given these fights more public space in which to play out. And in another similarity to America, instead of energizing the body politic, the rise of the primaries seems to have left the French voting public even more discontented with their choices.

For the time being, this might not make much difference. But it is far too early to conclude that the current state of French politics will result in effective, sustained, and sound governance. The French would do well to keep in mind that the electoral system that made an Obama presidency possible is the same one that gave the United States Donald Trump. ♦

NAFTA Modernization Moves Forward

THOMAS J. DONOHUE
PRESIDENT AND CEO
U.S. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

The debate over how to update the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has shifted into high gear. The Trump administration just released its objectives for modernizing the 23-year-old trade deal. And negotiators recently held three days of public hearings with more than 140 stakeholders from across the economy, during which the U.S. Chamber of Commerce shared its recommendations for updating the agreement.

As the leading voice for business in Washington and around the world, the Chamber has been at the center of the debate from the beginning—and for a simple reason. Some 14 million U.S. jobs depend on trade with Canada and Mexico, and $1.3 trillion in trade crosses our borders annually. The livelihoods of many of our nation's farmers, ranchers, manufacturers, service providers, and small businesses are directly or indirectly tied to NAFTA.

So the Chamber has fought hard to ensure that negotiators do no harm, preserving market access and rules that work well. We've pushed our leaders to follow the process set out in the 2015 Trade Promotion Authority law, which has the buy-in of Congress and the support of the business and agriculture communities. And to limit uncertainty and minimize political and economic harm, we've urged the administration to move quickly.

We are pleased that our calls have been largely heeded so far. Through its negotiating objectives, the administration has signaled it will pursue strong, enforceable standards that will enable an improved NAFTA to serve as a model for future trade agreements. We will also press negotiators to focus on areas like digital commerce, intellectual property, agriculture, energy, customs, investment, procurement, rules of origin, state-owned enterprises, express delivery services, and regulatory and technical barriers to trade.

However, on one of the administration's top objectives—cutting the U.S. trade deficit—we offer a word of caution. The U.S. trade balance—whether overall or with a specific partner—is not a fair measure of who's "winning" on trade. Suggesting that imports are somehow a problem to be solved or that services trade is less important than goods trade would be a mistake. Attempting to chart a course for trade policy on such a basis is likely to lead to the wrong priorities.

If we keep the focus where it belongs, NAFTA can be modernized in a way that will preserve millions of U.S. jobs and expand the agreement's benefits for new parts of America's 21st century economy. This goal is eminently achievable, and the Chamber looks forward to helping make it a reality.

Learn more at uschamber.com/abovethefold.

The Iranian Express

Tehran is using its airlines to transport fighters to Syria. It shouldn't be buying more planes from Airbus and Boeing.

By Emanuele Ottolenghi

On November 30, 2016, Syria watcher Tobias Schneider tweeted out pictures of an Iraqi Shia militiaman boarding an Iranian commercial airliner en route to Damascus. One selfie taken on the plane showed young men in military fatigues in the background. Another photo, likely taken when the militiaman arrived in Damascus, showed a large Syrian Arab Airlines Ilyushin-76 cargo plane on the tarmac. Three days later, the Facebook page of the Iranian opposition site Persian War News published pictures of another Iraqi fighter on his way to Syria's battlefields.

The photos are undated but their authenticity is not in dispute. They are evidence of Iran's ongoing airlift of fighters to Syria's battlefields. And both sets of images show the same airplane staircase logo, that of Faza Andishan Arvand Company—the ground services operator at Iran's Abadan International Airport.

An Iraqi Shia militiaman boarding an Iranian commercial airliner en route to Damascus in 2016

A small city near the mouth of the Shatt-el Arab River, Abadan is a stone's throw from the Iran-Iraq border and just across the river's shallow waters from the Iraqi city of Basra. It is home to Iran's largest oil refinery and was the scene of bitter fighting in the early stages of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). Since the summer of 2015, it has also been a regular stop for Iranian and Syrian aircraft flying between Tehran and Damascus and the key component of Iran's giant effort to shift the balance of Syria's civil war in favor of the regime of Bashar al-Assad. In one social media posting, a militiaman even geotagged his selfie to Abadan.

Publicly accessible flight trackers detail a complex logistical operation that brought Iranian cargo to Syria at least 923 times between January 16, 2016—an important date, as it is when the 2015 Iran nuclear deal was implemented—and July 9, 2017.

Gathering such information was once the preserve of governments who could launch their own satellites. The digital age has made it possible for commercial websites to independently follow air traffic. While trackers cannot see what or who is flying inside the aircraft, the robust Iranian traffic crisscrossing Iraqi airspace to and from Damascus is easily recorded by anyone with a fast Internet connection and the patience to monitor that corner of the sky.

The airlift is the work of regional carriers like Pouya Air, Syrian Arab Airlines, and Mahan Air, but also includes the fleet of the Iranian national carrier, Iran Air. The operation, moreover, is not new. In 2011, Iran Air was sanctioned by the U.S. Department of the Treasury for its role transporting weapons and personnel to Syria. But the Iran nuclear deal—formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA—lifted U.S. sanctions against Iran's aviation sector and delisted Iran Air, enabling it to reach multi-billion-dollar deals with Airbus and Boeing for at least 180 aircraft.

What can be seen in the Syrian skies, in other words, is something that Western governments find inconvenient to acknowledge: that the biggest beneficiary so far of the JCPOA's economic dividends is also an accomplice to ongoing war crimes. Further, there is a very real chance that Tehran may use Airbus's and Boeing's supply of planes, spare parts, and technical training to sustain its deadly effort to keep Assad in power.

That Iran Air frequently lands in Damascus is no proof of wrongdoing. But there is no innocent reason for frequent commercial flights from Iran to Damascus, an average of 11 a week, including two operated by Iran Air. Although the two flights are ostensibly commercial, they cannot be purchased on Iran Air's booking website or through travel agencies. The Iran Air website does not even include Damascus among its destinations from Tehran, where the flights originate.

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Taking advantage of the 2015 nuclear deal negotiated with the Obama administration, Iran has flown troops and materiel to aid the Assad regime in Syria nearly a thousand times. The refinery town of Abadan is the key staging ground and transit point.

MAP, TWS; SATELLITE IMAGE, GETTY

Flight tracking websites also show that Iranian aircraft flying to Syria rely on deceptive practices—switching off transponders for parts of their journeys, falsifying flight manifests, and concealing their destinations by broadcasting flight numbers associated with different itineraries—to hide the volume of traffic between Iran and Syria. Planes suddenly vanish from the screen in midair or broadcast flight numbers associated with a certain route—say, Tehran-Baghdad—while actually flying a different path and even leaving from different airports.

In many cases, aircraft returning from Syria are quickly repurposed for commercial flights once they get back to Tehran. The Iran Air plane (registration EP-IEE) that returned from Abadan to Damascus on March 23, for example, flew back to Tehran and departed on a scheduled flight for Istanbul the next day. A Mahan Air aircraft (registration EP-MNF) that flew to Damascus through Abadan on March 30 flew back to Abadan—likely carrying wounded fighters—then went on to Tehran and left on a scheduled flight for Ankara. Iran Air has flown to Syria at least 134 times since the JCPOA was implemented. This is what research could conclusively determine, which is likely fewer than the actual number of flights flown by the airline.

Nation-states with dedicated intelligence services have the resources to determine what is loaded on and off these planes. In 2011, when the Obama administration wished to squeeze Iran, it had no difficulty finding the evidence to designate Iran Air for its transportation of military equipment and personnel to Syria. But without political will, it is doubtful that intelligence-grade eyes in the sky will bother with an old Airbus A300 offloading cargo outside Damascus. And in 2017, the JCPOA's success hinges on ignoring what Iranian airlines are carrying to Damascus, because the reimposition of sanctions, especially after the Airbus and Boeing deals, has complex political ramifications and the potential to undo the nuclear agreement itself.

For those without access to sophisticated satellite imagery and classified material, the anecdotal evidence provided from fighters' smartphones inside Iranian and Syrian commercial aircraft reveals the purpose of the hundreds of nominally commercial flights connecting Iran to a war zone. Social media show Shia militias gathering in Abadan, whence Tehran's regime airlifts them to Damascus. They show planes offloading men already in battledress and document the return flights that carry the wounded and dead back to Abadan. Choreographed funerals follow in the streets of Qom and Mashad, grim parades of sorrow with slogans to fuel the regime's propaganda of martyrdom.

It's been a cruel war in Syria, and statistics do no justice to the ferocity. More than half a million Syrians have lost their lives in a conflict that began in March 2011. The country has been emptied of its people, with half of the prewar population of about 21 million either internally displaced or seeking shelter in neighboring countries. The crisis has spilled over into Europe, which has seen an unprecedented wave of refugees. The Assad regime has made systematic use of chemical weapons, ethnic cleansing, and torture, and indiscriminately attacks civilian targets like hospitals and markets.

From almost the beginning of the war, Iran has provided financial assistance to Assad and military aid ranging from weaponry to additional manpower. It has played an even greater role in sustaining the slaughter in Syria since the summer of 2015, when it began coordinating its efforts to save the Assad regime with Russia's. During a crucial visit to Moscow in July 2015, Qassem Suleimani, the commander of the Quds force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), laid out plans to defeat the insurgents who were close to seizing all of Aleppo, Syria's largest city. A surge of troops was needed. Shia militias were deployed under the command of IRGC officers. Initially, they were fighters from Iran's Lebanese proxy Hezbollah and two brigades of Afghan and Pakistani Shia recruits. Eventually, Iraqi militias were sent into battle, too.

A selfie of an Iraqi militiaman on the plane showing men in military fatigues in the background

All these troops needed to get to Syria. And they needed resupply once in combat. The sea route from Iran to Syria is long (through the Persian Gulf, around the Arabian Peninsula, to the Red Sea and Suez Canal), and Iranian vessels carrying weapons to Hezbollah have been stopped many times as they sailed through the Mediterranean. Flying, on the other hand is quick—and since the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, there are no U.S. fighter jets to disrupt Iranian flights traversing Iraqi airspace. Damascus committed every civilian plane at its disposal to ensure the plan would succeed. Iran assigned the task to its commercial airlines.

The airlift has been instrumental in facilitating the atrocities against the Syrian civilian population and delivered vital support for the Assad regime. It has helped cement Hezbollah's role as a state within a state inside Lebanon and build a multinational Shiite militia by carrying fighters from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan to participate in joint military operations alongside Hezbollah and the Syrian army. These "international brigades" are fully integrated into the IRGC military structure. To make matters worse, this supply chain is greatly contributing to the Hezbollah/IRGC military buildup on the Israel-Syria border. The Israeli air force's bombing raids against weapons convoys heading to Lebanon are a direct response to the increased flow of arms from Syria to Lebanon—and to Hezbollah's acquisition of such advanced weaponry as Russian-made anti-ship missiles. All together this may presage a wider regional war.

Much of it could be avoided if the Trump administration chooses to reveal the evidence of Iran Air's participation in the airlift and disrupts the air corridor established by Iran to prop up Assad. But the JCPOA makes such steps much more difficult.

We know that the Iranian airlift is almost as old as the Syrian civil war. Treasury's 2011 sanctions targeted Mahan Air, Iran Air, and Iran Air Tours for transporting military equipment, including rockets and missiles, to Syria. Activities not covered by the JCPOA.

In March 2012, Yas Air (later renamed Pouya Air) was also designated for supplying arms to Iranian proxies in Africa and Syria. Alongside Yas Air, Treasury also listed 117 Iranian aircraft owned by Iran Air, Mahan Air, and Yas Air and even published aerial imagery of Iran Air cargo docking at the Damascus International terminal, proving the involvement of Iranian commercial aircraft in Assad's war. Treasury went on to designate Syrian Arab Airlines in 2013 and Syria's Cham Wings in 2016—both, again, for transporting weapons and fighters to Syria.

Mahan remains under U.S. sanctions as a material supporter of terrorism, and so do Cham Wings, Syrian Arab Airlines and Pouya Air. Iran Air, by contrast, has been allowed to rejoin the world market. What changed is that in the summer of 2015, President Obama agreed, as part of the JCPOA, to lift decades-old U.S. sanctions against Iran's aviation sector, paving the way to the multi-billion-dollar deals that aircraft industry giants Airbus and Boeing signed shortly thereafter. The JCPOA did not include Cham Wings, Syrian Arab Airlines, and Pouya Air because they were deemed not to be ferrying civilian passengers between Tehran and Damascus. That Iran was still using its commercial fleet to sustain Assad's brutal fight for survival was not going to stand in the way of President Obama's signature foreign policy achievement.

One can only speculate why a deal supposedly focused on Iran's nuclear activities and international sanctions would remove specific non-nuclear U.S. sanctions.

Tehran argued that the U.S. sanctions affected the safety and security of Iranian aircraft. Officials with Iran's airlines have long claimed they have to ground numerous planes because they cannot purchase the equipment to service them.

It may equally have been due to guilt over an older Iranian grievance. President Obama showed that he bought into Iran's lachrymose version of history when, in his 2009 Cairo speech, he acknowledged Washington's role in the 1953 coup against Iranian prime minister Mohammad Mossadeq (recently declassified documents prove his apologetic solicitude to Tehran both unwarranted and unnecessary).

Secretary of State John Kerry may simply have wanted to sweeten the deal to make sure the Iranians would not walk away—adding one more concession to the many that were piling up. He may have felt, moreover, it was a win-win situation, given that Boeing would benefit from the end to U.S. aviation sanctions against Iran.

The interior of a Mahan Air plane, its seats covered with plastic, prepared to transport wounded fighters from the Syrian war zone

Whatever the reasoning, all but four Iranian airlines can now buy planes, spare parts, and services on the global aviation market, and U.S. financial institutions can service these deals. For the first time since the Iranian revolution of 1979, Iran can build a modern fleet that will allow it to compete with Gulf aviation hubs such as Abu Dhabi, Doha, and Dubai.

Since the nuclear deal, Iran Air has gone shopping. Besides the headline deals with Airbus (for a reported 100 planes) and Boeing (for 80 more), it signed a deal with the Italian-French joint venture ATR for 20 regional aircraft. And there could be additional deals with Canada's Bombardier, Brazil's Embraer, and Japan's Mitsubishi. Aseman Airlines, Iran's third-largest carrier, reached a deal to lease seven Airbus jets in December 2016 and signed a deal with Boeing to buy 30 737 MAX single-aisle aircraft this spring. At the Paris Air Show in June, smaller Iranian carriers Zagros Airlines and the formerly sanctioned Iran Air Tours formalized deals to buy new planes from Airbus. This list will only grow. Iran's transportation minister has said that the country is looking to buy as many as 400 to 500 aircraft in the next decade to replace its aging fleet.

Iran Air has already started to receive its new aircraft. Airbus delivered one A321 in January 2017 and two A330s in March. The first four turboprops from ATR joined Iran Air's fleet in May. Boeing deliveries are expected to start in April 2018. The deals will help Iran's war effort in Syria, whether directly through the supply of new aircraft that could be used to carry weapons to Syria or indirectly, through the supply of technical assistance, spare parts, and training that could help maintain the older aircraft involved in the airlift.

The JCPOA thus creates a dilemma for the Trump administration: Given the Iranian civil aviation industry's involvement in the Syrian airlift, it is in the U.S. interest to impose sanctions on that industry to prevent Iran from exploiting global commerce to aid its illicit activities. But, simultaneously, the end of longstanding U.S. aviation sanctions against Iran has opened the potentially lucrative Iranian market to U.S. manufacturers. Boeing insists that its $16.6 billion deal with Iran Air, and possible future deals between the U.S. aviation industry and other Iranian airlines, means that tens of thousands of U.S. jobs are now at stake. Boeing claims the deals will "support nearly 100,000 U.S. jobs" despite the fact that, as my FDD colleagues Toby Dershowitz and Tyler Stapleton recently documented, Boeing has been outsourcing jobs overseas and laying off people as its assembly lines increasingly use automation to fulfill orders.

A multi-billion-dollar business transaction is a powerful incentive against any reimposition of sanctions. It also proves the hollowness of the argument that JCPOA advocates made in 2015 that the sanctions' snapback mechanism would insulate the deal from Iranian cheating. The economic stakes make it much harder for any administration to reimpose sanctions on the strength of any but the most egregious violations. Just this week, the Trump administration certified Iran is in compliance with the 2015 deal, though it did slap sanctions on a handful of Iranian companies at the same time. President Trump has been strong on anti-Iran rhetoric and in his first six months in office his Treasury Department has sanctioned more Iranian entities

than the Obama administration did in the previous four years. But the designations are meaningless in comparison with reimposing sanctions on the aviation sector.

Western negotiators reasoned that Iran wanted to fix its economy. Its thirst for trade and investment would empower those forces inside the regime that wished to improve relations with the world's trading powers. Prioritizing jobs and infrastructure would, they thought, moderate Iran. Economic self-interest would make Iran's nuclear and regional ambitions—two sides of the same coin, really—subordinate to the desires of its ambitious middle class.

It is the opposite that has proved true. The Airbus and Boeing deals prove that a thirst for trade trumps Western nations' interests to Iran's advantage. Iran's continuing use of civilian aircraft to sustain Assad's killing machine in Syria is irrelevant when faced with multi-billion-dollar airplane orders.

Iranians celebrate the delivery of their first Airbus plane, January 12, 2017.

FATEMEH BAHRAMI / ANADOLU AGENCY / GETTY

Stopping the flow of weapons and militias is necessary if we want to frustrate Assad's efforts to vanquish the rebels and cleanse the Syrian countryside of its Sunni inhabitants. It would also be a blow to Iran's quest for dominance in the Levant.

Proving Iran Air's participation in a military airlift on behalf of the IRGC, whose goal is to sustain the Syrian slaughter and arm Hezbollah, would make the airline eligible for renewed sanctions. Renewed sanctions would kill the big business deals signed with Iran Air and likely would trigger a chain reaction leading to the collapse of the entire 2015 agreement. Those who lobbied hard for the JCPOA knew full well that Iran suborned its civil aviation sector to its military adventurism in Syria. But acquiescence with Iran's action in Syria was the political price to ensure multi-billion-dollar orders for the aviation industry. Instead of keeping Iran honest to its commitments by using aircraft deals as leverage, the Obama administration facilitated their smooth sailing through Treasury's licensing process before it left office, leaving the Trump administration with a much harder choice to make, especially now that the contracts have mushroomed and deliveries have begun.

If Iran wanted, it could insulate its commercial industry from its activities by relying solely on military aircraft. This is what its partner in Syria does. Russia is supplying its forces there, but it uses only military-operated Ilyushin and Antonov cargo planes registered to its air force. Iran could do the same and rely on military cargo to conduct its military operations. The problem of its support for Assad and Hezbollah would not go away, of course. But it would mean that its fleet renewal—alongside access to spare parts, maintenance services, and technical training—would not be tied to such activities. Instead, Tehran prefers to use the JCPOA and the economic benefits it yields as a shield to protect its nefarious support for Assad and Hezbollah.

For the United States, there should be no half measures. Limiting sales to nonsanctioned entities will not prevent those involved in the airlift from benefiting from the upgrade of the Iranian air fleet. End-user licenses may not be honored. Trained technicians could easily transfer knowledge to their counterparts in sanctioned airlines or repair aircraft involved in the airlift. Spare parts supplied to licensed Iranian buyers can be resold to designated entities.

A firewall cannot be established between Iran's commercial air traffic and its military airlifts to Syria. Iran uses its civil aviation sector to fulfill military needs. The JCPOA lifted decades of U.S. and international sanctions against Iran's civil aviation sector exactly when the sector became vital to Tehran's efforts in the Syrian war.

U.S. reluctance to look into the mounting evidence of Iran's aviation sector collusion with the Assad regime has only further emboldened the country at a time when the JCPOA has given its leaders additional financial resources to pursue their regional hegemonic ambitions. And this is one more reason why the Trump administration should suspend licensing for aircraft deals with Iranian commercial carriers while it conducts a thorough review of their role in the airlifts to Syria. The United States should proceed to revoke licenses and reimpose sanctions if that role is conclusively ascertained. But the only way to prevent U.S. manufacturers such as Boeing from supplying aircraft to Iranian entities involved in material support for terrorism is to rely on U.S. nonnuclear sanctions. While the United States cannot stop every plane, it can use sanctions to exact a heavy price on Iran's aviation sector.

JCPOA negotiators believed that sanctions worked and that Iran, when put to a choice, would act rationally. The Trump administration should put that choice to them again: Iran should not be allowed to fly Hezbollah and Boeing at the same time. ♦

Over the Edge

Bixby Creek Bridge, Highway 1

Big Sur's big slide

By Steven F. Hayward

Cambria, Calif.

The commonplace joke of California sliding into the Pacific Ocean, either from seismic activity or an overaccumulation of New Age weirdness, has achieved some semblance of reality this year. It's long been said that California's climate comprises just two periods: mudslide season and fire season. This year's record rainfall, which followed years of predictions that climate change had mired the state in permanent drought, brought forth the usual winter floods and mudslides, followed by a springtime super-bloom of grass and brush that have made for an early and severe start to the summer fire season.

California is used to mudslides in predictable areas, chiefly where major highways run along cliffs or hillsides, most notoriously Malibu, Ventura, Big Sur, and the far northern coast. Most slides are cleared within hours, a few days at most. The main exception is Highway 1 through Big Sur, just north of where I live. This legendary stretch has been closed more than 60 times by slides in its 80-year history and is presently closed for an undetermined length of time after a recent round of landslides cut the road in three places.

In the 1920s, inmates from Folsom State Prison, living in tents, helped build Highway 1—for 35 cents per day.

The 100-mile stretch of Highway 1 between San Simeon and Monterey is one of the world's great coastal drives and a marvel of civil engineering. Construction began by the state of California in the 1920s using convicts paid 35 cents a day along with a sentence reduction, but the road didn't get very far until it was adopted as a public works program in the New Deal, finally opening as a through route in 1937. The road features several concrete span bridges that are still considered architectural and engineering marvels, especially the Bixby Creek Bridge, which most Americans have seen in numerous TV car commercials over the years. The Bixby Creek Bridge is a reminder that America used to be able to build major public works at a reasonable price; Bixby cost about $200,000, or about $3.5 million adjusted for inflation. Today that figure wouldn't even cover preliminary environmental and engineering reviews. Completing the highway opened Big Sur to generations of tourists.

The road would never be built if proposed *de novo* today. Never mind the whining environmentalists; budget-conscious legislators or bureaucrats would stop it. (Though I suppose if someone proposed to build high-speed rail through that stretch . . .) Road engineers probably like the challenge of the extremely expensive fixes required to keep patching up this inherently unstable

TOP, MICHELE FALZONE

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roadbed. Though it doesn't have huge overall traffic numbers, its twists and turns make a slow trip, especially when you get caught behind a Winnebago with Kansas plates, so it is usually crowded. There is no shoulder most of the way, few turnouts, and no passing lanes.

When a slide hits the Big Sur road, it will sometimes be months before the road can be repaired. In 1983, one of the biggest El Niño rain years on record, a massive slide estimated at 2.7 million cubic yards of earth at a spot called Sycamore Draw near the Julia Pfeiffer Burns State Park required over a year to be repaired in what California's Department of Transportation says was the largest earth-moving project in its history. (For perspective, that volume of earth would fill more than 200,000 dump trucks.) One construction worker, Ernest "Skinner" Pierce, was killed when a secondary slide occurred during rebuilding, burying him and his skip loader under so much debris that his body was never recovered. More than 30 years later, the massive gash left in the cliff by the repair work is still obvious driving by.

The roadway was severed by a massive landslide north of Ragged Point in Big Sur, California, May 25.

Local firefighters and volunteers receive a food drop from a helicopter at the Post Ranch Inn, March 3.

Although there have been the predictable editorials wondering if Highway 1 should be abandoned, it is inconceivable because the road and its environs are too much a part of California's culture, as well as the locale for some of California's toniest boutique resorts, like the Post Ranch Inn. Ocean-view rooms at Post Ranch start around $1,500 a night, but expect to add $300 for dinner for two at its premier Sierra Mar restaurant. The Post Ranch Inn is cut off to car traffic right now, but remains open by flying in guests and supplies by helicopter. A two-night stay with the helicopter trip will set you back $4,291. I'm sure it's buying carbon offsets. Meanwhile, its fleet of Lexus Hybrids that normally ferry customers from the distant parking lot up to the guest suites is sitting idle. The high-end boutique resort just across the road from Post Ranch, Ventana, is closed until road access is restored from the north, which will take at least until September.

A little further down the socioeconomic food chain, and the highway, is the rustic cliffside residence once owned by Rita Hayworth and Orson Welles that was converted in 1949 into the Nepenthe restaurant. The food is terrific (I recommend the Ambrosia burger with Cheddar), but I always try to harsh the happy hippie vibe by talking about the greatness of Richard Nixon at the bar. Nepenthe remains open at reduced capacity for the handful of local residents who can make it there. Maybe the most obscure cultural fact, however, is that Big Sur was the location for the only Hollywood movie done in Esperanto, the 1966 cult horror film *Incubus*, starring William Shatner. Given that Shatner also spoke Klingon in one of the *Star Trek* films, he is perhaps the only actor ever to speak two made-up languages on the big screen.

Did I say Big Sur was an integral part of California's culture? It would be more accurate to say it is an integral part of California's *counterculture*, as the opening of the road made it a favorite destination for a who's who of avant-garde writers, artists, and philosophers, and later a prime destination for hitchhiking hippies. There's a tiny library dedicated to Henry Miller and the Beat writers who liked to retreat to the redwood groves, but the crown jewel of the Big Sur countercultural scene has to be the Esalen Institute, headquarters of the New Age "human potential" movement founded back in the 1960s. Esalen was supposedly the setting for the penultimate scene of the final episode of *Mad Men*, in which Don Draper is depicted in a meditation circle on a bluff overlooking the Pacific, getting the inspiration for the famous Coca-Cola TV spot "I'd Like to Teach the World to Sing." Esalen wouldn't allow the show to shoot the scenes on its grounds—the production trucks and equipment would have been too disruptive to the morning yoga circles, group meditations, and naked sunbathers—so they were shot elsewhere.

Esalen is perched on a cliff at a natural hot springs, where seminars begin with a moment of meditation, the kitchen staff chants "ohmmmm" in a circle before bringing out the gluten-free fare, and guests are encouraged to experience the hot spring baths au naturel. (I declined the opportunity at an Esalen conference I once attended, but am reliably informed that Norm Ornstein and Tom Mann went in for the authentic experience. Yet they say Republicans are crude.) Another time in the late 1980s,

ABOVE, BRIAN VAN DER BRUG / LOS ANGELES TIMES / GETTY; BELOW, NEWSCOM

I was cruising up Highway 1 on the summer day of the "Harmonic Convergence" (don't ask) and tried to crash the Esalen Institute to see what wackiness they might be up to. I was told at the gate that the Convergence was being observed in a low-key "communitarian" way, but that since I didn't have a reservation I could not go in. My response: "Well, could I astral-project myself, or would that be cheating?"

Esalen played a vital role in ending the Cold War with the Soviet Union—just ask them. In a reverse Potemkin Village, Esalen started the "Esalen Soviet-American Exchange Program" that convened gatherings of Soviet citizens and Americans starting in the early 1980s for "dialogues." Esalen sponsored the first visit of alternative energy guru Amory Lovins to the Soviet Union, which a less senescent country might have regarded as a hostile act.

Weekend workshops at Esalen start at $420—if you want to stay in your sleeping bag. Actual rooms for the weekend start at $1,505 for a single, $2,310 for double occupancy. Like everything else in coastal California, New Age reflection and meditation has gone upscale. But you'll have to wait a while. Esalen is shut right now too and has laid off a large portion of its staff because of the road closure.

No kidding.

This year, the Big Sur road is cut in three places. The Pfeiffer Canyon Bridge near the hamlet of Big Sur washed out in February and has to be completely replaced. Just south of Lucia, near the midpoint of the Big Sur highway, is Paul's Slide (yes—like wildfires, landslides here get their own names), over which a temporary one-lane dirt road was intermittently available only for local residents and businesses until repairs reopened part of that section to general traffic on July 19. But the notable slide this year occurred on May 20 on the south end of the road, more than a month after the last significant rain, when more than five million cubic yards of earth (no one really can say how much) slid into the Pacific near Mud Creek, visibly changing the coastline. The slide is so massive and unstable that Caltrans can't offer an estimate for when it might be repaired.

Right now, you can access a 12-mile segment of the middle of Highway 1 between Paul's Slide and the Mud Creek slide by means of the narrow and terrifying Nacimiento-Fergusson Road that comes over the high coastal mountains from the interior of Monterey County. It is a road with many blind hairpin corners and no guardrails on its many sheer cliffs. It drops down from a 2,780-foot summit to the sea in about seven miles that seem much longer. Naturally, I've made the harrowing trip twice in recent weeks, unable to resist taking in the eerie sensation of driving down an empty road. At the hamlet of Gorda (where gasoline is still available for a mere $6.60 a gallon for regular, $7.39 for supreme), the road is closed to further traffic, which doesn't bar anyone with walking shoes, however.

Walking a couple miles down the yellow line of the closed portions of the highway feels like being in a zombie apocalypse movie. I've pulled off many times over the years to take a view, but you don't appreciate how noisy the normal traffic is until there isn't any. As astounding as the scenery is from a motorcar, a solitary walk along the cliffs summons to mind all the clichés about transcendence and authenticity. And then you round a corner to see the Mud Creek slide . . .

The slide can't actually be seen in its entirety from the north, and news reports of its instability appeared to be true on my first visit in May, when wind gusts started small but visible secondary slides. But the most notable feature of the slide is the large tongue of debris jutting out into the ocean that has altered the coastline so dramatically that maps will need to be changed. Caltrans has installed a special radar detection system to track movement in the slide while it begins work on trying to clear a dirt road through it, which was underway on my recent second visit. There is no estimate of when the highway might be restored to normal traffic, but it will probably be more than a year—longer if significant rains come again this winter.

The Mud Creek slide is the largest ever to hit the highway, and maybe it is a metaphor for California's larger defects: This beautiful, often magical place is nonetheless sliding away from our long-running efforts to subdue it for our pleasure, requiring ever more strenuous repairs affordable only because of the prodigious wealth the state nonetheless overspends anyway. And it is a reminder of California's growing class divide, too. The road engineers and construction workers who patch up this unstable route are probably not customers of Esalen or the Post Ranch Inn, most of whom seldom give a thought to Ernest Pierce, entombed forever at the site of the Sycamore Draw slide.

At least Caltrans has a sense of humor. Where the road disappears, there's a sign that fits California right now: "Rough road." And getting rougher all the time. ♦

TONY MARTIN

Future President Reagan campaigning for President Truman's reelection (1948)

COURTESY OF THE RONALD REAGAN PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND FOUNDATION

Reagan Reconsidered

Republicans have overlooked their hero's origin story. BY JAY COST

As somebody who makes a living, in part, by writing history, I have a confession against interest: I am not a big fan of biographies. My main problem is the constant interruption of narrative flow. Real life moves along multiple tracks simultaneously, but a biographer can only discuss one item at a time, so, for instance, a discussion of Alexander Hamilton's constitutional theory has to be interrupted by personal news.

In contrast, I much prefer thematic books, particularly those that delineate the political philosophies that animated the great historical personages. Johns Hopkins University Press had a great series in this vein, detailing the thinking of James Madison, George Washington, Thomas Paine, and others.

> **The Working Class Republican**
> *Ronald Reagan and the Return of Blue-Collar Conservatism*
> by Henry Olsen
> Broadside, 368 pp., $27.99

This series, dormant since 2012, came to mind when reading *The Working Class Republican*, Henry Olsen's new book on the political thought of Ronald Reagan.

For the longest time, Reagan was dismissed as an intellectual lightweight—in part because he was a conservative and thus did not have the "proper" views. But Reagan also had a disarmingly folksy way of communicating ideas, which gave the false impression that he had not put a lot of thought into politics. This notion was dealt a heavy blow in 2001, with the publication of *Reagan, In His Own Hand*, an edited volume of Reagan's writings that demonstrated the depth of his political views.

Olsen, a leading political analyst and a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a Washington think tank, has taken the next step in this progression, working through the voluminous and scattered historical record on Reagan to encapsulate and characterize what, exactly, his views amounted to. *The Working Class Republican* is the fruit of these fine labors.

Jay Cost is a senior writer at THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

Olsen discovers a Reagan who eschewed typical left-right categories. He obviously didn't fit in with the programmatic New Dealers like Henry Wallace and postwar liberals like Lyndon Johnson. But he also didn't fit in with conservative ideologues, be they libertarians like Barry Goldwater or supply-siders like Jack Kemp.

Instead, Olsen argues, Reagan saw politics as a debate over whether government would push people down or lift them up. The former view, which Olsen primarily attributes to Henry Wallace (Franklin Roosevelt's second vice president), offers a Faustian bargain that begins by breeding dependence on welfare, transitions to statist control of society, and ends with totalitarianism. The latter view—Reagan's own—endeavored to help people make the most of themselves. That implies assistance for the truly needy, as well as public spending on things like infrastructure and education. Contrary to the strict constitutionalism of Goldwater, this vision of government was vigorous, nationalistic, and bold.

Olsen argues that these beliefs animated much of Reagan's political career. They made possible his lifelong anticommunism, enabling him to perceive a threat that many of his old Hollywood friends and many New Dealers could not fully appreciate. As for domestic politics, his agenda did not amount to a redefinition of what government should and should not do. Instead, it focused on cutting waste from government, reducing the influence of bureaucrats over everyday life, and maintaining a social safety net. Moreover, Reagan endeavored to use government to unlock human potential, which is how he saw his tax cuts when he was president as well as his expansion of the state university system when he was governor of California.

Olsen offers us a new understanding of Reagan as a politician and thinker anchored in the real problems of everyday Americans. This is a welcome "third way" to understand Reagan, correcting what Olsen persuasively argues are the limitations of both conservative and liberal views. Conservatives, per Olsen, are too inclined to see Reagan as Goldwater's heir, dogmatically hewing to conservative principles above all else. Liberals, on the other hand, are still prone to see him as a lightweight or some sort of elitist. Olsen makes a compelling case that Reagan was at heart a kind of populist whose belief in using government to lift people up meant, in the particular conditions of postwar America, unburdening them from the demands of the state. In this way, Reagan comes across as a sort of modern-day Jeffersonian, a pragmatist who appreciated the virtues of government but was also deeply cognizant of its dangers.

Olsen is at his sharpest when examining Reagan, but when he turns his attention to other 20th-century political figures, he tends to lose focus. This is particularly true of Franklin Roosevelt, who in this narrative is Reagan's political idol. Olsen's effort to situate Reagan within FDR's New Deal tradition could have used more precision. Olsen argues that Reagan's views fit within what Olsen calls the "public New Deal," but this concept is hard to define, other than as the things about the New Deal that Reagan liked. And Olsen makes no mention of such New Deal legislation as the National Industrial Recovery Act and the Agricultural Adjustment Act—exactly the sort of systematic endeavors to control society that Olsen says Reagan always opposed. Far from being an "undertone" (Olsen's term) of the New Deal, they were in fact the first major parts of the program, implemented during FDR's famous first 100 days.

Moreover, Olsen endeavors to make a distinction between Harry Truman's interpretation of the New Deal and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, arguing that the former was consistent with Reagan's views but the latter was not. Yet Truman's Fair Deal in fact served as the blueprint for postwar liberalism, including the Great Society itself. And it included the very sorts of sweeping social welfare programs that Reagan would later argue bred dependence.

Finally, Olsen brushes past the fact that Reagan was clearly a New Deal apostate. Most New Dealers, after all, continued to back the Democratic party through the 1960s. Indeed, many of them, including Eleanor Roosevelt, were deeply disappointed by the Kennedy-Johnson ticket of 1960. The cultural revolution of the New Left, which seemed to culminate with the George McGovern candidacy of 1972, turned off many New Dealers. But Reagan had long since been out of the fold. Olsen does not explain how or why Reagan was remaining true to FDR's principles while the likes of Adlai Stevenson, JFK, LBJ, and Hubert Humphrey were not.

If anything, the Reagan that Olsen discovers seems less like a New Dealer and more like an earnest Gilded Age Republican, the sort who supported protective tariffs to boost wages for industrial workers as well as a generous pension program for the widows, orphans, and wounded veterans of the Civil War. A William McKinley rather than a Franklin Roosevelt.

If Olsen is imprecise on the intellectual tradition from which Reagan comes, he is as sharp as a tack on what Reagan's legacy means for conservatives today. His last chapter serves as a sweeping rebuke of the successors of Reagan within the Republican party. He argues that the GOP has failed to follow through on Reagan's dream of building a new majority coalition because it has misunderstood its hero's priorities.

Instead of looking for ways to lift up the broad middle of the country, Republicans have fallen into three traps. First, their emphasis on tax cuts for the wealthy, combined with cuts to entitlement programs, gives the impression that they value money over people. Second, prioritizing abstractions like the budget deficit or constitutional limitations to government makes it seem like Republican leaders are out of touch with ordinary Americans. Third, their occasional interest in extreme poverty (such as George W. Bush's "compassionate conservative" agenda and Paul Ryan's efforts after 2012) makes them seem uninterested in the sorts of working-class Americans who flocked to Reagan's banner.

Republicans have won elections, of course, but Olsen reckons that this is not because Republican candidates and

policies have been especially attractive but because the Democratic obsession with Wallace-style central planning has been especially unattractive. Voters rejected Hillarycare in 1994 and Obamacare in 2010, but that does not mean they were endorsing Medicare cuts or the constitutional purity of the Tea Party.

I do not find this account fully persuasive. For instance, Olsen says that Republicans have rarely won a majority of the popular vote for president since 1984. True—but too many analysts have made too much of this. After all, *most* presidential elections in the postwar era can be explained by unrelated factors like the rate of economic growth and the job approval of the incumbent. The most notable divergence from this trend, in 2000, led to the election of George W. Bush, a Republican, despite the popularity of President Bill Clinton and robust economic growth that should have helped Democratic nominee Al Gore.

Still, there is more than a little food for thought here. I was particularly persuaded by Olsen's claim that Republicans have lost Reagan's connection to average Americans—and not just because they can't imitate his superlative use of political rhetoric. Reagan's agenda had a grounding in the real problems of everyday Americans that, Olsen rightly notes, the Paul Ryan plan does not. That was also a problem with the recent failed efforts to repeal and replace Obamacare: Neither the House nor the Senate version offered a positive vision of how people would be able reliably to afford medical care in the future. (I had not thought of the issue from this perspective until I read Olsen's closing chapter.)

All told, *The Working Class Republican* is a superb book. Like all works of such ambitious scope, it sometimes misses the mark, but that does not diminish the overall excellence of the effort. I highly recommend it. Not only is it a good delineation of the political philosophy of Ronald Reagan, it can also help reground conservatives in the age of Donald Trump. ♦

Harassment Strategy

Chaos, confusion, and chance in foreign policy.

BY JORDAN CHANDLER HIRSCH

All Measures Short of War
The Contest for the Twenty-First Century and the Future of American Power
by Thomas J. Wright
Yale, 288 pp., $27.50

In April 2012, a Philippine surveillance vessel interdicted eight Chinese fishing ships sailing toward Scarborough Reef, an outcropping in the South China Sea claimed by both China and the Philippines (as well as Taiwan). Incensed, China dispatched its own surveillance vessels to block the Philippines from arresting the fishermen. It then worked in tandem with private Chinese fishermen to trap Filipino fishermen inside the reef and block any exit or re-entry. Meanwhile, Chinese military ships loomed in the distance. The United States mediated a settlement, but once Philippine forces withdrew, China broke the agreement and took Scarborough for its own.

In *All Measures Short of War*, Tom Wright argues that Scarborough-like conflicts will define great-power rivalry in the 21st century. A scholar at the Brookings Institution, he takes his book's title from President Franklin Roosevelt's strategy before Pearl Harbor to help Britain defeat Germany without entering the war or provoking a Nazi response. Wright believes that the United States faces similar circumstances today. Its adversaries are using aggressive but calibrated tactics to "gain an upper hand in ways short of a major war." These confrontations often amount to an accumulation of ambiguities and nuisances—harrying, cyberattacks, and on-again-off-again conflict—all meant to blur red lines rather than cut through them. The country and its leadership, Wright contends, is "ill prepared." He sets out "to explain why great-power rivalry has returned, how to think about it, and how the United States can respond."

Wright accurately diagnoses the problem's cause: the demise of the idea of "convergence"—the notion that "as countries embraced globalization" following the collapse of the Soviet Union, "they would become more 'responsible' members of the liberal international order" and liberalize domestically as well. Powers great and small, the theory went, would collaborate on shared challenges and "recognize that their interests were best served" by joining the U.S.-led order. This was only possible, Wright points out, because "the defining and unique feature of world politics after the Cold War was the absence" of geopolitical competition against the United States. This unipolarity meant that "there were limits to how [countries] would express" their opposition to U.S. policies. For example, Wright notes, "when Russia opposed the United States over Iraq in 2003, it did not arm Saddam Hussein, intervene on his behalf, or place military advisers in Iraq." By 2015, it would do all three for Syria's Bashar al-Assad.

In the intervening dozen years, convergence gave way to chaos. Wright embarks on a sweeping tour across three continents. Europe, he writes, "is an ugly picture." A Brexit-beset EU teeters "on the brink of a breakup," while Russia menaces European security and sows confusion, the refugee crisis festers, and terrorists strike major European cities. In Asia, China has engaged in territorial disputes in the

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South China Sea by bullying (as in the Scarborough episode) and bulldozing (dredging to create thousands of acres of land where before there was only water). In the Middle East, the cold war between Iran and Saudi Arabia threatens to "deteriorate to the point that it endangers key U.S. interests." At nearly 100 pages, Wright's survey stretches on too long, but it does usefully synthesize many seemingly disparate trends and incidents.

One of Wright's major themes is "the problem of revisionism." Some nation-states like the world order as it is; they might try to better their geopolitical or economic positions, but they do so "through the legitimate processes of the international order." By contrast, revisionist states, in their pursuit of power, territory, and influence over other countries, happily break those bounds. Although that description of countries might seem to evoke Nazi Germany and its ambitions for global domination, present-day revisionist states often seek merely regional disruption.

In that more modest goal lies the paradox and the predicament of revisionism. Revisionist states tend to target local gains or the nonvital interests of their great-power rivals. They aim for the sweet spot, maximizing advantage while stopping short of provoking retaliation. Doing so, Wright explains, "leaves the status quo power torn over how to respond, debating whether it's worth it to commit the blood and treasure." Revisionists pose what we might call a "too early, too early, too late" problem: One island grab in the South China Sea isn't worth risking war, but dozens of islands and thousands of acres later, it's too late to roll back the gains.

The problem comes in different shapes and sizes. Russia wants to restore great-power rule to Europe. Isolated and opportunistic, Wright argues, Moscow "is willing to consider limited war in order to achieve its objectives" and sees its stomach for hybrid warfare "as a strategic advantage that could give it escalation dominance." China, by contrast, poses a subtler test. It's a rising power with a stake in the U.S.-led order that also hopes to carve out a sphere of influence in East Asia. Wright argues that Beijing not only wants to avoid war with Washington—it *must*, lest it lose its spoils and expose its regime to instability. To preserve the bluff, China "maintain[s] the illusion" that inadvertent conflict could break out suddenly to induce "an abundance of caution among American policymakers."

Satellite image of an artificial island built by the Chinese government in the South China Sea

DIGITALGLOBE / GETTY

Wright sees the post-Cold War period as an interregnum: Moscow, Beijing, and other revisionists were bound eventually to defy Washington, once they had "accumulated enough power to push back." But Moscow and Beijing were effective in pushing back, Wright carefully acknowledges, at least in part because of the shortcomings of the Obama administration. At first, the administration could not bring itself to believe that Russia and China—which, after all, faced the shared threats of terrorism and climate change—"would have interests that conflicted directly with those of the United States." Even after subsequent events shattered that misconception, President Obama nonetheless feared overextension. Anxious, above all, to avoid war, he shied away from steps that could increase the risk of one. Such an approach, Wright recognizes, "leave[s] very few options for responding to revisionism."

If the menu of options available to American foreign-policy officials is to be expanded, Wright correctly observes, they (and presumably also the country they serve) will need an increased tolerance for risk and ambiguity. But Wright's strategy for combating revisionism, which he dubs "responsible competition," tends to ignore that insight. Russia, he concedes, "has a key strategic advantage . . . it is more willing to fight for its sphere of influence than is the United States or Western Europe." By accepting that premise, Wright relegates himself to the identical "very few options" countenanced by Obama—nonlethal assistance and more sanctions. The options he offers for grappling with China are only slightly more creative: The United States should, he says, consider "expanding and sustaining" operations to protect freedom of navigation, and equipping regional partners with dredging tools and missile defense technology. Even as Wright commendably calls for an injection of will into U.S. foreign policy, his suggestions would do little to get beyond the paralyzing dichotomy ("do nothing" or "war") that eliminated so many responses to revisionism during the Obama years.

Wright also insufficiently explores the source of Obama's attitudes toward geopolitics—attitudes shared by a bipartisan segment of the foreign-policy establishment—and thus misses the true reason it is so difficult for the United States to cope with some countries' revisionist ambitions. It has to do with a mindset that arose during the Cold War. For all its

complexities, the Cold War eventually offered a familiar set of patterns and players. In the State Department, in the Pentagon, in the intelligence community, various sciences sprang up to calculate the variables of foreign policy, gaming out every scenario. These techniques survived the collapse of the USSR, evolving with the times but retaining their bias for predictability. The current international environment, however, is defined by its unpredictability. The United States hasn't confronted such an unstable climate since before World War II. It's not so much that competition has returned—it is ever present—but that confusion, surprise, and, most of all, fortune have. Washington doesn't just need will; it needs to relearn the role of chance.

For a wider range of answers, and for insight into the challenges that the United States faces, Wright might have turned to the man whose policies inspired his book's title. Far from a technocrat, President Roosevelt navigated the United States through a time of stormy disorder, in which statesmen were more familiar with geopolitical turmoil. He not only aided Great Britain but also rebuilt U.S. forces and sent patrols deep into the Atlantic to ward off German encroachment. With Churchill, Roosevelt issued the Atlantic Charter, establishing the political aims of the Allies in the struggle against fascism. In the current era of revisionism, when China has its bulldozers and Russia sends its "little green men" (soldiers without official state insignia) into Ukraine, the United States brings its own advantages into the arena: not just wealth and technology and military strength, but also moral clarity.

Both in his analysis and by his example, Wright makes the case for grand strategy—as opposed to siloed specialization—to confront the dangers of the present moment and those we can anticipate. With a grand strategic vision, experts of both parties can begin to design the policies needed to beat back revisionism and adjust to a world in constant flux. ♦

However Improbable

The spiritualist convictions of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

BY MICHAEL DIRDA

Even the most devoted Baker Street Irregular or Baker Street Babe must have trouble keeping up with the frenetic celebration of Sherlock Holmes and his creator Arthur Conan Doyle—the movies and TV series, the volumes of letters and diaries, the special editions of the canonical stories, the multiple collections of "new" cases, and the biographical and critical studies galore.

This past spring alone brought us several excellent works, including Michael Sims's *Arthur and Sherlock: Conan Doyle and the Creation of Holmes* and Lyndsay Faye's *The Whole Art of Detection: Lost Mysteries of Sherlock Holmes*. Stephen Fry, no less, recorded audiobook versions of the four Holmes novels and all 56 stories (although some are missing from the version available in the United States). And among this summer's forthcoming treats will be Mattias Boström's much-anticipated *From Holmes to Sherlock: The Story of the Men and Women Who Created an Icon.*

Michael Dirda is the author, most recently, of Browsings. *His* On Conan Doyle *won the 2012 Edgar Award for biography and criticism.*

Through a Glass, Darkly
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and the Quest to Solve the Greatest Mystery of All
by Stefan Bechtel and Laurence Roy Stains
St. Martin's, 320 pp., $26.99

Given such abundance, it would be easy to overlook *Through a Glass, Darkly*. Still, there are several reasons to pay this entertaining book some attention. First of all, it focuses not on Conan Doyle's writing but on his troubling, even embarrassing, belief in spirits, séances, and fairies. Second, it provides a potted history of spiritualism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. And third, Stefan Bechtel and Laurence Roy Stains write brisk, sprightly prose, just as you would expect from brisk, sprightly magazine journalists. In fact, their book aspires to be "a jolly romp, rather than a scholarly treatise." While the phrase "a jolly romp" may provoke a shudder, *Through a Glass, Darkly* actually does deliver plenty of excellent literary entertainment.

Following some introductory preliminaries, Bechtel and Stains begin in earnest with a dramatic account of the birth of spiritualism. In 1848, the Fox family, residing in upstate New York, grew increasingly frightened by inexplicable noises in the house they were renting. One night, though, daughter Kate noticed a pattern to the sounds. So, on an impulse, the girl shouted out, "Here, Mister Splitfoot, do as I do!" She then snapped her fingers twice "and two raps immediately followed, apparently out of thin air." When sister Margaret clapped her hands four times, "four raps immediately followed." A still shaken but now intrigued Mrs. Fox took up the game—"How old is my daughter Margaret?"—and back came 14 raps. "How old is Kate?" Twelve raps.

After the Fox family finally moved, the mysterious noises followed them to their new home. Eventually, Kate and Margaret, and later their much older sister Leah, acquiesced in their destiny as mediums. But were they really human doorways to the spirit world? Late in life, Margaret confessed that everything had been faked, even demonstrating how she produced the rapping sounds by cracking her big toe. That should have settled the matter but, not long before she died, Margaret firmly recanted her recantation, now asserting that she'd been bribed by nonbelievers.

As jesting Pilate famously asked, "What is truth?"

By the later 19th century, spiritualism had grown into a worldwide movement and séances were commonplace, even family affairs. The whole movement was dominated by women, Bechtel and Stains note, many of whom were also active in the suffragist cause. Though not believers themselves, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony affirmed that "The only religious sect in the world . . . that has recognized the equality of woman, is the Spiritualists."

Meanwhile, in Britain the decline of traditional religious belief, combined with renewed scientific interest in the supernatural, led to the 1882 founding of the Society for Psychical Research, a body devoted to investigating the evidence for anything uncanny, from haunted houses to astral projection. Arthur Conan Doyle, a newly minted physician and aspiring writer, soon joined. Over the next three decades he would attend lectures and table-tipping soirées, read books with such deliciously evocative titles as *Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World* and *Phantasms of the Living*, and keep his mind open to the possibility of after-death survival. Might he have also experienced some precognitive hint of what was to come? His brother Innes once remarked—at a time when Conan Doyle, by then a world-famous author, was much involved in public affairs—that "it would be strange if your real career should prove to be political and not literary." To which Arthur, preoccupied with a letter he was writing, immediately shot back, "It will be religious."

In fact, Conan Doyle would pass the last 14 years of his life as the St. Paul of spiritualism. So far as can be determined, his conversion occurred in 1916 after Lily Loder-Symonds, a friend of his second wife, Jean, proved to be a sensitive medium. So great were her powers that she was able to repeat the gist of an "extremely personal conversation" that Conan Doyle had had with Lady Jean's brother Malcolm many years earlier. There was, apparently, no possible way she could have known about this conversation. As Conan Doyle concluded, any rational explanation would be more farfetched than one presuming psychic abilities. That said, a skeptic might suggest that Malcolm told his sister about the conversation and Jean then told her friend Lily. O ye of little faith!

Still, by the middle of First World War, the creator of Sherlock Holmes had grown convinced that spiritualism was of the greatest benefit to mankind. After all, it removed the fear of death by providing proof that, somehow, we live on in the Other World—or Summerland, as it was sometimes called. What's more, numerous séances revealed that not only our spirits but even our personalities survive the grave. What knowledge could be of more comfort to the families of soldiers blown to pieces in the trenches or to those who had lost loved ones during the devastating influenza pandemic of 1918?

Nine-year-old Frances Griffiths and the supposed Cottingley Fairies (1917)

Being a man who acted on his convictions and always lived up to his motto "Steel true, blade straight," Conan Doyle was soon preaching the spiritualist gospel from lecture platforms all over the world. Early on, he even debated a onetime Franciscan priest turned atheist named Joseph McCabe. Bechtel and Stains see the humor in this: "A former friar argues for a godless universe, while the creator of the supremely rational detective Sherlock Holmes claims that we can talk to the dead." The debate itself assumed a surreal, tent-revival kitsch: "As Queen's Hall filled that night, each man was backed up by his chosen supporters onstage with him: fifty spiritualists to Conan Doyle's right, fifty atheists to McCabe's left." Which the sheep, which the goats? By the end of the evening, the debate was declared a draw.

The middle part of *Through a Glass, Darkly* tracks some of the more colorful figures in spiritualist history, naturally zeroing in on the celebrated D.D. Home—the model for Robert Browning's hypocritical "Mr. Sludge, 'The Medium'"—and the flirtatious Mina Crandon, better known as "Margery," her *nom de séance*. There's also a chapter about the two young girls who demonstrated—with photographs—that there really were fairies at the bottom of the garden, or at least in the woods near their home. These 1917 pictures of the so-called Cottingley Fairies now look egregiously fake, but Conan Doyle and even wiser heads thought them real. Only in 1986 did one of the girls, now a very old lady, explain how she and her cousin fabricated the pictures as a lark, then found their joke taken seriously.

The last third of this jolly romp focuses on Conan Doyle's friend and ideological adversary Harry Houdini. The famous mantra of *The X-Files*—"I want to believe"—neatly sums up the great escapologist's initial attitude toward spiritualism. In particular, Houdini longed to make contact with his dead mother. Unfortunately, to his knowing eye, all the mediums resorted to familiar stage tricks. Before long, this self-appointed scourge of the spiritualists was regularly exposing the fraudulent. On one notable occasion he even tried to show Conan Doyle that anything a medium could do, a magician could do better.

First, Houdini brought out a small slate, which was subsequently suspended from his apartment's ceiling so that it floated in the air. Conan Doyle was then asked to select a cork ball from one of several and immerse it in some white ink. Following this, the author of *The New Revelation* and *Pheneas Speaks* was ordered to leave the building, walk a couple of blocks, and jot a phrase or short message on a scrap of paper. When Conan Doyle returned, Houdini told him to fish the cork ball from out of the ink and hold it up to the free-floating slate. Immediately, "the white ball appeared to attach to the slate, as if it were magnetized, and then it began to move across the slate, spelling out words as it went." The words spelled out were

"Mene, mene, tekel, upharsin"—the memorable Old Testament judgment written by a gigantic hand upon a wall during Belshazzar's feast. They were precisely the words Conan Doyle had scribbled on his piece of paper.

Through a Glass, Darkly closes, naturally enough, with the deaths of Houdini in 1926 and Conan Doyle in 1930. Both promised to make contact with loved ones from the other side. Did they? One medium appears to have learned certain code words only the magician's wife Bess would recognize, but she suspected chicanery. Another medium, before a spiritualist jamboree at Royal Albert Hall, announced that an invisible Conan Doyle was in their midst and wished to deliver a private communication to his wife. What that whispered message said was never revealed by Lady Jean.

While *Through a Glass, Darkly* lacks the heft of Ruth Brandon's magisterial (and quite wonderful) history *The Spiritualists*, it also eschews the mocking skepticism of modern-day debunkers, such as Martin Gardner. Instead, its agnostic authors proffer a series of lively set pieces drawn from the history of spiritualism, as well as a sympathetic account of how the creator of Sherlock Holmes solved, at least to his own satisfaction, the greatest mystery of them all. ♦

B&A

Hauntingly Lovely

Grief, permanence, and the ghosts in our midst.

BY TIM MARKATOS

Rooney Mara and a besheeted Casey Affleck

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A Ghost Story
Directed by David Lowery

Evidently the state of American moviemaking has regressed to the point where all low- to mid-budget movies made at the periphery of the mainstream must be either triumphs or failures, as though all it takes to make an artistically significant film is merely an artistic vision. *A Ghost Story*, written and directed by David Lowery, is our latest case in point, a movie that has left critics and casual viewers alike searching for a word to express their enjoyment of a movie being marketed as an art film and deciding on "masterpiece" or something in its vicinity. Would that more moviegoers were as unafraid of calling an odd duck an odd duck as David Lowery is of making one.

A Ghost Story reunites Rooney Mara and Casey Affleck—they had previously played star-crossed criminals in Lowery's 2013 breakout *Ain't Them Bodies Saints*—as a Texas couple credited only as "M" and "C." They live in a ranch by way of Brooklyn brownstone; there's an old upright piano (which has been there from time immemorial), a record collection, a wall full of books (with a "NIETZSCHE" textbook suggestively centered in one cutaway shot). M and C's relationship is on the rocks, ostensibly because Mara's character wants to move someplace more exciting while Affleck's wants to stay put with the house and its history—though I suspect it doesn't help their cause, metaphysically speaking, that Lowery lets the early scenes of the movie roll on uncomfortably long.

One day Affleck's character is killed, offscreen, in a car accident. Lowery shows us his mangled face on the steering wheel in close up then fades to the white sheet covering it at the morgue. An excruciating three minutes later, after Mara has inspected the face of her beloved and wandered out of frame, Affleck sits up, hops off the cart, and wanders back home reincarnated as ghost, still wearing the white sheet but with eye holes cut out, in the style of a trick-or-treating Charles Schulz child. He'll spend the rest of the movie, and thus his afterlife, circumscribed by the perimeter of the ranch, trying to get Mara's attention, scraping at a wall to excavate a note that she hid there, terrorizing future residents long after Mara is gone, befriending a fellow sheet-ghost next door, and skipping across time in a series of astrophotographic crossfades best left to be discovered for yourself.

Lowery shot his film in a tight 4:3 aspect ratio with rounded corners, so watching the movie approximates the effect of looking through a particularly high-quality stereoscopic View-Master. Here's one moodily lit and meticulously arranged image that may or may

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not stir your senses; here's another and another.

One image will probably determine how you feel about the entire movie and its peculiar admixture of melancholic atmospherics with cutesy frills. Some 20 minutes into the film, after ghost Affleck has come home to roost, here is Mara, sitting on the kitchen floor eating a pie while Affleck stands in the corner watching her. The scene lasts for five minutes; there are no camera movements, cuts, or music. For a certain kind of viewer, this is a purgatorial fate far worse than Affleck's. I like the idea of what Lowery is doing—trying to concretize grief and loss through the act of eating—but the length of the scene draws so much attention to itself that it loops quickly around from touchingly absurd to overwrought.

Even when the movie speeds up after this scene, just how sophisticated Lowery is as a filmmaker remains up for debate. A shot of Affleck watching Mara leave the house multiple times in the span of 30 seconds, somehow edited to appear as if it were all done in one take without cuts, is an invigorating twist on the changing-of-seasons montage (though earlier this year director Terence Davies outdid Lowery with a showstopping portrait-session-as-passage-of-time sequence in *A Quiet Passion*, Davies's film about Emily Dickinson). Other scenes in Lowery's film are a different kind of invigorating, such as when an armchair philosopher listed ominously in the credits as "Prognosticator" (played by Will Oldham) delivers an interminable monologue on the futility of all artistic endeavor, the finitude of human life, and the inevitable heat death of the universe to a room full of partiers who have descended on the house long after Mara has moved out. Just when you're ready to throw something at the screen to shut him up, Lowery puts us out of our misery by implying with a humorous jump cut that an enraged Affleck has blown him up.

Jokes aside, the movie itself seems to contradict the nihilistic Prognosticator by the long take and dramatic framing Lowery accords him (and the fact that he has more spoken lines than just about anyone else in the film). Lowery has made a film whose central conceit is that some part of a dead man lives on after his bodily end, yet Lowery also gives a loud megaphone to the philosophical contention that such ideas are hogwash. That's a tension worth pondering.

For all of Lowery's flirtations with the idea of the immortality of the soul, the nihilism of that kitchen-table orator has a strong pull. The movie ends abruptly when Affleck finally digs Mara's secret message out of the wall and his sheet collapses into a formless heap, a ghost no more. What happens to this soul next? That's the question I'm most interested in, but it's the only one that Lowery seems too afraid to touch. ♦

B&A

Top of His Game

Roger Federer's improbable domination at Wimbledon.

by Tom Perrotta

In July 2016, Roger Federer looked like he might be calling time on his illustrious career. He was 34, old for an athlete and especially so for tennis, a game in which Federer was at his best in his mid- to late 20s. His knee gave out on him in the semifinals of Wimbledon, and he announced that he would take off the rest of the year to heal. Federer was doing what he had to do, but like everyone else, he worried that the outlook was grim.

By now, you know how everything went. Federer hasn't just played well in 2017. No, that would be the mildest of compliments, like saying Babe Ruth was a decent hitter or that Wayne Gretzky knew how to skate. At age 35—he turns 36 next month—Federer is better than he's ever been. He won the Australian Open, the first Grand Slam of the season. He has the most impressive record in tennis this year: 31-2. And, best of all, he collected the title he loves most: Wimbledon, for the eighth time, the most wins by any man in history. He has now won 19 Grand Slam titles in his career, 4 more than anyone else.

Tomas Berdych, who lost to Federer in the Wimbledon semifinals, said aloud what all players must be thinking: Federer "doesn't really seem" to be "getting any older or anything like that, or slowing down at all. . . . He's playing by far the best tennis right now."

No one expected this, not even Federer himself.

"I knew I could do great again maybe one day, but not at this level," Federer said after his 6-3, 6-1, 6-4 demolition of Marin Cilic in the Wimbledon final. "So I guess you would have laughed, too, if I told you I was going to win two Slams this year. People wouldn't believe me if I said that. I also didn't believe that."

Federer had the first surgery of his career in February 2016, after he injured his left knee while bathing his twin daughters. He recovered quickly, but back on court he didn't feel right. Then at Wimbledon last year the worst happened: He fell and tweaked the knee again in the semifinals. Federer lost the match in five sets to Milos Raonic and sounded despondent in a press conference, worried that he would never be the same player again.

"I don't slip a lot," he said. "I don't ever fall down. It was a different fall for me than I've ever had."

Grand Slam winners know that any victory could easily be the last. Mats

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Wilander reached his peak in 1988, when he won three of the majors in a single season. He was 24 years old and never won another. Ivan Lendl, the winner of eight Grand Slam titles before he was 30, played his last four years without finding number nine. Not even Rod Laver could beat back time: After winning all four Grand Slam titles in 1969, at age 31, he never won another over an eight-year stretch.

Habits and success can fade rapidly in tennis; several months off can be an eternity. Players are religious about when and how much they'll hit, and fear disaster if they can't follow their routine. Federer had to be patient. And unafraid, too, as everyone else worked and the game and its strategies evolved. That's why Federer did not expect much when he went to Australia this year; it was his first tournament in six months. But the lack of belief may have given him freedom.

In his first Australian match, he lost a set before winning in four and was smiling like he hadn't played in years. He loved being back, and he kept surviving, including two five-set thrillers (beating Kei Nishikori 6-7(4), 6-4, 6-1, 4-6, 6-3 in the fourth round and Stan Wawrinka 7-5, 6-3, 1-6, 4-6, 6-3 in the semis). Then in the final he beat Rafael Nadal in five sets: 6-4, 3-6, 6-1, 3-6, 6-3. It was the most stunning victory of his career; he trailed 3-1 in the fifth against his friend and longtime nemesis before taking five straight games.

Many wonder if Federer's renewed success shows that you can win more by playing less tennis. Don't enter as many tournaments, the thinking goes, so you remain well rested and reduce injuries. This sounds simple and smart, until you realize it can't possibly be true. Players insist that they need a lot of practice to retain their skills, just as a gymnast would prepare for the Olympics. There's no other way to feel comfortable hitting a tennis ball in professional matches than to do just that—except, as it turns out, if you're Roger Federer. One miracle is enough for a season for anyone. Federer, somehow, now has two.

In Australia, the matches were tight and full of drama. At Wimbledon, Federer dominated. He went to London as the favorite—adding pressure, especially as he skipped the French Open to put all his energy into the grass courts of Wimbledon. When you lean on one tournament, that's a mental challenge. Just ask Lendl, who skipped the French Open twice in the hope of finally winning Wimbledon and didn't succeed. Federer didn't hide his emotions in London. "I always say when I'm nervous, I care, which is a great thing," he noted after his second-round match. "When you're only practicing, you never get nervous like this because it doesn't matter if you miss break points or play bad or whatever it is."

Federer at Wimbledon

Roger Federer nervous? It couldn't have been more apparent than in the second round, when he was obviously anxious and barely escaped losing the first set against low-ranked Dusan Lajovic (it ended in a tiebreaker). Federer wanted this title more than any of his career, and at the start it looked like he might need to beat both Novak Djokovic and Nadal to do it. But it didn't take long for everything to come together. Federer won his matches with increasing ease. Nadal lost a five-set thriller to Gilles Müller (6-3, 6-4, 3-6, 4-6, 15-13). Djokovic stumbled with an ache in his elbow. Berdych was no match, and Marin Cilic, the finalist, had a painful blister on his foot. Federer, remarkably, didn't lose a set the entire tournament.

Yet there was more to Federer's win than good fortune. Yes, his health was suddenly an advantage as everyone else succumbed to injuries and upsets. But the ways he has changed his game count for more. You probably remember Federer in his 20s, with broad cheeks and long hair. He was a different player, perhaps with more speed and definitely different tactics that were more about overwhelming opponents than outsmarting them. He used to slice his backhand often, waiting for a chance to crush a forehand—and he had enough speed to cover his opponent's attacks of that shot. These days Federer is more mature, with more variety and a bigger racket that prevents mishits. His speed is a bit less than in his youth, but he makes up for it by predicting his opponent's upcoming shots better than ever—and then hustling. The racket, which caused too-long forehands at times when he first began to play with it, is now settled and accedes to Federer's commands.

There's a new Federer coach, too. Federer famously didn't have one in his heyday, but trains these days with Ivan Ljubicic, a wily former player who made up for his lack of speed with smart plays. It's no coincidence that Ljubicic used to thump his one-handed backhand, as Federer does now. All the evidence you need is the way he returned Nadal's serves in Australia: full swings usually aiming balls at the server's feet or, if time, down the line for a winner. He did the same at Wimbledon, too. Older and wiser, this Federer no longer waits. For anything.

Federer and his wife, Mirka, have four children now, two sets of twins (two girls age 8, and two boys age 3). Federer thanks his wife all the time in conversation, saying that the moment Mirka has had enough, he'll be gone. She clearly wants to keep going, and she knows that Federer, besides his endless talent, has had a good deal of luck, too. She herself was a promising tennis player in the 1990s, but a foot injury ended her career in 2002. She knows tennis can be cruel: One bit of trouble can end everything. So they both want to stick around as long as they can, a love that's wonderful for both of them—and for all of us who love tennis. ♦

NEWSCOM

The Little Sick

It's fine—but the Sundance darling doesn't deliver as promised. BY JOHN PODHORETZ

Zoe Kazan and Kumail Nanjiani

The Big Sick
Directed by Michael Showalter

The Big Sick is a movie about a struggling comedian from a Pakistani family and his graduate-student waif of a girlfriend. They break up. She gets a mysterious infection and is put in a medically induced coma. He must deal with her parents, who are angry with him for the way he treated her, and his own parents, who are angry that he won't accept a Pakistani girl of their choosing.

The Big Sick is nice. There are some good lines. The scenes with the Pakistani family are charming. Ray Romano is sweetly hangdog as the girl's dad. Zoe Kazan plays Romano's daughter, and she's as lovely here as she was in *Ruby Sparks*, the distressingly overlooked movie she also wrote in 2012. Her character's name is Emily, which is also the name of the movie's co-screenwriter. Emily Gordon wrote the picture with her husband, Kumail Nanjiani. He is the star of *The Big Sick*, in which he plays a character named Kumail Nanjiani. The movie is a comic account of their courtship and her illness.

The fact that this is a true story and that the movie's second half is about the difficulties posed by the interfaith relationship at its center adds a measure of spice to the proceedings. But only a measure. I was deeply disappointed by *The Big Sick*, and not so much because of the movie itself but because of the hype surrounding it. It is a very slight thing, and it has been made out to be so much more, largely due to its real-life origins and the fact that it centers on an immigrant Muslim family.

Since January, when it debuted at the Sundance Film Festival, movie critics and bloggers and the entire community of Internet pop-culture publicists had been telling me how wonderful it was—a new-millennium blend of Nora Ephron and Woody Allen. The initial notices out of Sundance were glowing: "By turns romantic, rueful, and hilarious," panted *Variety*. "The best romantic comedy in years," said RogerEbert.com. "Effortlessly funny and charming romance that subtly deepens into a moving portrait of cross-cultural, cross-generational bonds," announced the *Los Angeles Times*. Amazon Studios paid $12 million for the rights.

It would be difficult for any movie to live up to such advance praise, though occasionally something does (*La La Land* did). Moreover, buzz out of Sundance regarding a heartwarming slice-of-life picture is usually a warning sign, not a cause for excitement and anticipation. For every *Little Miss Sunshine*, which took the festival by storm and then the country as well, there are five *The Spitfire Grill*s (a movie whose very name triggers post-traumatic stress disorder even though I saw it two decades ago).

To be sure, *The Big Sick* is leagues superior to *The Spitfire Grill*, but it doesn't deserve to be mentioned in the same breath as *Little Miss Sunshine*. And as a portrait of the world of the ambitious up-and-coming comic, it doesn't hold a candle to its producer Judd Apatow's own *Funny People* or last year's terrific *Don't Think Twice*. It isn't even as interesting as the HBO show Apatow is currently producing on exactly the same subject—*Crashing*, with Pete Holmes. And you don't have to go to a theater to watch *Crashing*.

The central flaw in *The Big Sick* is that Nanjiani doesn't hold the screen at all. He occasionally displays the off-kilter comic timing he uses to great effect on HBO's *Silicon Valley*, but he's a mild and recessive presence. When Emily haltingly tells him she's "overwhelmed" by him—she's too afraid to say she loves him—the line falls flat because Nanjiani is anything but overwhelming. When he and Kazan are on screen together, she blows him out of the water because she's so vivid and alive and he's just not.

So now that I've talked *The Big Sick* down, maybe you should go see it. Don't look at its ridiculous 97 percent approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes. This is a movie that with fewer jokes and no 9/11 references could have been a *Hallmark Hall of Fame* special in 1984. Those were watchable. So is this. It's even decent. It's just not that great, and everybody who told me it was and got my hopes up should be forced to watch *The Spitfire Grill* again as penance. ♦

APATOW PRODUCTIONS

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

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—Donald Trump, July 9, 2017

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