

The background of the cover is a photograph of the New America building's facade. The building is made of light-colored stone and features several large arched windows and doorways. The words "NEW AMERICA" are inscribed in gold letters above the central entrance. In the foreground, there are ornate black metal lamp posts with white globe lights and a small plaque that reads "NEW AMERICA".

the weekly Standard

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THE DO- NOT- THINK TANK

Google's threat
to open discourse
BY CHRISTINE ROSEN

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Good News at Harvard!

So the eminent author and social scientist Charles Murray gave a speech at Harvard last week. Ordinarily that wouldn't be terribly newsworthy—eminent authors give speeches at distinguished universities every day of the week and sometimes even on weekends.

But these are not ordinary times. When Murray visited Middlebury College in March, his public engagement had to be canceled for fear of violent protests. Instead, a video interview with a faculty moderator was streamed from a secure location. As Murray and Professor Allison Stanger left that location to depart for dinner, they were set upon by a mob that roughed up Stanger, who was taken to the emergency room with a concussion and other injuries.

The news last week was that nothing like that happened at Harvard. Murray was kind enough to write an after-action report for THE WEEKLY STANDARD's website. Here is part of what he had to say:

I was apprehensive as I flew to Boston on Wednesday [Sept. 6]. Protests were being organized for the lecture I was to give at Harvard that evening, and the intel made me think that another Middlebury might be in the works. Many of Harvard's undergraduates are infected by the same virus that's been going around elsewhere ("There's no right to free speech for evil people, and we know who's evil.") And there were the guys in ski masks to worry about. Surely antifa and Black Bloc have flourishing chapters in a place like Cambridge.

Getting beaten up wasn't a concern. At Middlebury, Professor Allison Stanger did get beaten up, badly, as we struggled to get to the car, and that did not go unnoticed by college administrators. Since then, every cam-



It being Harvard, there was silliness (above), but the shouting stayed outside (below).



pus I have visited has made sure that I got lots of police protection. But I did think it was likely that the students would be chanting and wouldn't stop, fire alarms would be set off, and I wouldn't be able to speak.

For that to have happened at Harvard would have been a disaster. If a nerdy, inoffensive speaker like me, lecturing on themes from *Coming*

Apart (not a controversial book), could be shouted down at Harvard, we would be faced with a scary new normal. If not even Harvard, with all its resources, would protect free speech against the mob, then why would less exalted institutions be expected to do so? If a small minority of students gets to decide who is allowed to speak even at Harvard, what institution would hold the line?

But happily, my lecture went off without a hitch. The audience was attentive, or at least quiet. About 10 minutes in, a dozen students, a few holding signs, got up and left, but they made no attempt to disrupt the lecture. There was half an hour of Q&A, with no holds barred on the questions I was asked and no holding back on my answers—just as a Q&A should be. How did Harvard do it?

For the answer to that question, THE SCRAPBOOK encourages you to visit weeklystandard.com and read the rest of Murray's article. You can find it under the headline "Harvard Shows How It Should Be Done." But we will summarize the answer: The grownups did what grownups are supposed to do. And so did the students, for that matter.

Still and all, THE SCRAPBOOK confesses to feeling both cheered and depressed by the story. In our younger days, the late Ben Wattenberg wrote a book with one of the most memorable titles ever, *The Good News Is the Bad News Is Wrong*. It came to mind when we heard Murray's Harvard appearance had come off successfully: The bad news is that this good news is newsworthy. ♦

Whitewash Interrupted

Last week the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., removed from its website a study absolving the Obama administration of any blame for its inaction in the face of the Syrian genocide. The study had

been scheduled for release amid much hoopla at a September 11 event hosted by the U.S. Institute of Peace.

The multi-author report was based on computational modeling, game theory, and interviews with a number of Syria experts and former policymakers. The conclusion?

There was nothing President Barack Obama could have done to stop the dictator Bashar al-Assad, along with his patrons Iran and Russia, from slaughtering hundreds of thousands of Syrians. Indeed, the study contended, had Obama intervened, he might have made the greatest humanitarian

IMAGES: STEVEN SENNE / AP

disaster of the still-young 21st century even worse.

Tablet magazine's Armin Rosen interviewed many of the museum's board members as well as Jewish community leaders and intellectuals to gauge their feelings about this attempt to launder Obama's reputation via the good offices of the Holocaust museum.

Writer Leon Wieseltier called it "an allegedly scientific study that justifies bystanderism" and added: "If I had the time I would gin up a parody version of this that will give us the computational-modeling algorithmic counterfactual analysis of John J. McCloy's decision not to bomb the Auschwitz ovens in 1944, I'm sure we could concoct the f—ing algorithms for that, too."

Meanwhile, a number of Middle East experts and journalists chastised the museum's decision to pull the paper. *New York* magazine argued that the public deserves the right to consider the findings in the report. But of course the argument has not been suppressed. The notion that there's nothing Obama could have done to stop Assad's killing machine has been the official line of the Obama administration and its media echo chamber ever since the Syrian despot first fired on unarmed protesters six-and-a-half years ago.

And the report was anything but disinterested. The museum's memorial council includes at least five former Obama National Security Council staffers, among them Ben Rhodes, arguably more responsible for the administration's Syria policy than anyone except the man he worked for.

The truth is Obama did not merely do nothing while Assad put the people

The ART of the DEAL

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RAISING the DEBT
CEILING FOR ONLY
3 MONTHS...

SO WE CAN USE
IT FOR POLITICAL
ADVANTAGE to
UNDERMINE YOUR
AGENDA.

DEAL.



of his country through a meat grinder and gassed children. He stepped aside out of respect for what he called Iran's "equities" in Syria. Assad was Tehran's man, and Obama didn't want to interfere lest his coveted deal with Iran's leaders come undone. Worse, as part of that deal, he approved filling the Iranian regime's war chest with billions of dollars in sanctions relief and repatriated funds that had been frozen in the United States ever since Ruhollah Khomeini's revolution. It's no exaggeration to say that the misbegotten Iran deal helped fund Assad's murderous campaign.

Whitewashing Obama's role and their own in a genocide, his aides

sought to etch their perverse draft of history in stone—in the stone halls of a museum whose stated mission is to inspire "citizens and leaders to confront hatred, prevent genocide, and promote human dignity." ♦

Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood

If you're still wondering how Donald Trump, a man whose approval rating sits at 36 percent in a September 6 NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll, ever became president, well, here's a clue: That same poll has Hillary Clinton's approval rating at 30 percent.



Syria: the wages of bystanderism

MOTASEM RASHED / ANADOLU AGENCY / GETTY

Mrs. Clinton, though, is still operating on the assumption that the public's dislike of her is all a big misunderstanding. She's about to launch a tour for the book telling her version of 2016 events that is both appropriately and amusingly titled: *What Happened*.

But even under an entirely dysfunctional Trump administration, Democrats are still having a difficult time



Can we talk about me now?

uniting their center and left factions. The general consensus is that Clinton's desire to reenter the spotlight with a book tour is not helpful, and the book's finger-pointing at her primary opponent, Bernie Sanders, threatens to further widen the rift in the party.

Herewith a smattering of anonymous quotes from Democratic insiders, officeholders, Obama administration members, and Clinton associates that have recently appeared in stories about Clinton's new book:

"She's doing harm to all of us because of her own selfishness. Honestly, I wish she'd just shut the [expletive] up and go away."

"None of this is good for the party. ... It's the Hillary Show, 100 percent. A lot of us are scratching our heads and wondering what she's trying to do. It's certainly not helpful."

"It is difficult for some of us, even like myself who've supported her, to play out all these media cycles about the blame game, and the excuses."

"There is a collective groan whenever there's another news cycle about this."

And those quotations are from Clinton's ostensible allies. Sanders supporters have been positively brutal. "While Trump has been ripping the country apart, [Clinton] has been taking long walks in the woods, drinking chardonnay, hobnobbing with celebrities and writing a book that entirely ignores the failure of the party establishment over a decade or two," progressive activist Jonathan Tasini told the *Hill*.

Not that any of the public criticism matters. We suspect Clinton is re-emerging now for the same reason she has done many inadvisable things: As we noted in this space last week, "VIP Platinum" tickets for the meet-and-greet at the Toronto stop on her book tour are being hawked for a mere \$3,000 (Canadian). ♦

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DREW ANGERER / GETTY

Gone but Not Forgotten

Last month the *Village Voice* announced it was ending its print edition, a 62-year run of muckraking reporting, cultural criticism, opinion, advocacy, and opposition—opposition to authority, to anything, sometimes to everything. Founded in 1955, by Norman Mailer among others, the *Voice* was America's original alternative weekly newspaper, giving rise to imitators from Baltimore to Seattle. But to me it was the local paper.

I grew up in Greenwich Village, around the corner from the offices, and for a short period I was lucky to work there. There were many great writers and journalists who started at the *Voice* or became famous there: civil rights advocate Nat Hentoff; Wayne Barrett, the crusading investigative reporter and early adversary of the real estate tycoon who would become the 45th president of the United States; the novelist Colson Whitehead; the photographer Sylvia Plachy; and dozens of others. But it occurs to me that among the most significant is a name most readers will not know, my friend the writer and editor Joe Wood, who died in 1999 at the age of 34. In a sense, Joe helped shape the way America looks today. It's difficult, for instance, to imagine the presidency of Barack Obama without the questions that shaped Joe and in turn shaped his friendships and how he influenced his friends.

The *Voice* was always on the left, sometimes the far left, sometimes the cranky left, in an age when these dispositions were far more marginal to America's mainstream than today. Yet it's difficult to overstate its impact on American culture and politics, as well as media in general. Its coverage of the gay community, for instance, espe-

cially during the AIDS crisis, compelled the large daily newspapers like the *New York Times* to devote more resources to covering an increasingly visible and vocal segment of America. The same was true of race and the politics around race, a subject the *Voice* not only covered but for which it served as a platform.



Before America argued about the nature of identity politics, its virtues and dangers, the *Voice* got there first—and sometimes the debates turned into brawls. In the late '80s, before my tenure, the paper's jazz critic Stanley Crouch punched, and was fired for punching, colleague Harry Allen, a prominent rap impresario/intellectual. What started as an argument over the direction of American music was so loaded that it spun out into a confrontation over race in America.

The obvious lesson that print and broadcast media across the country learned from the *Voice* was that if you were going to report on and write about race your newsroom would have to be equipped to do that work. You needed to hire African Americans.

Joe was a kid from the Bronx who wound up going to a private school in the borough, Riverdale, before he went on to Yale. I think he was so accustomed to being the only African American in any given room that he was keen to get that fact out of the way. He did not make it easy. He always opened a conversation with a stranger about race. He had edited a collection of essays on Malcolm X. He was writing a book about the slave-owning family that owned his family. Did you see the latest Spike Lee movie? What do you think about Public Enemy's last album?

Joe had a very acute sense of power, and if he felt his interlocutor flinch, he'd tear him to ribbons. But I can't count the number of times at a party I turned around again after a few minutes and saw Joe and his new best friend bright in the light of Joe's warm laugh.

But the deeper truth is that he wasn't interested just in race or writing about race—he was a movie fanatic at a time when memorizing classic European films entailed hours, days, weeks in dark theaters across New York. Race, though, was his way into the human experience—it was his experience, and thus part of

his way of explaining himself, to others and to himself.

And he was a kid from the Bronx who loved bird watching. He was at a writers' conference in Seattle and went to Mt. Rainier to look for birds he'd never seen before. It was July and the snows were not yet melted so they could not find his body. I'm sure I'm not the only one from the *Voice* or his large circle of friends who has been speaking to him constantly since he died nearly 20 years ago.

There are many reasons I hate to see the *Voice* disappear from newsstands, but that may be the main one: It reminds me of all the other voices I'll never hear again.

LEE SMITH

Not Dead Yet

The effort to repeal and replace Obamacare isn't quite dead. It will officially expire on September 30 without any further congressional intervention. According to guidance handed down by the Senate parliamentarian just before Labor Day, the end of the federal fiscal year is when this year's budget reconciliation bill—the Senate's annual shot at passing significant legislation that can't be filibustered—will die. If no health care bill passes before the end of the month, we can be certain that the Republican Congress will have failed to honor one of its chief promises.

As readers of this magazine will recall, numerous repeal efforts have already died—from “repeal-and-delay” to “repeal-and-replace” to the “skinny repeal.” But there is yet another effort to reform Obamacare on the table.

Sponsored by Republican senators Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Bill Cassidy of Louisiana, the plan would keep almost all of Obamacare's taxes and spending but, starting in 2020, give the money back to the states in the form of block grants. As Graham says, if you like your Obamacare, you can keep your Obamacare. States could subsidize the purchase of health insurance just as current law does (though some states would have to kick in more money than they do now). Blue states could use the money to test single-payer plans if they wanted. Red states could spend it entirely on high-risk pools, subsidizing the sickest patients enough to effectively remove them from the individual market and bring down costs for everyone. “You've got to cover people who've been sick,” Graham tells us, “but there will be 50 different ways to do it.”

There are a few reasons to think that this last-ditch bill might pass. The biggest sign of hope came on September 6 when Arizona senator John McCain, who cast the deciding vote against the “skinny repeal” bill at the end of July, signaled his support for the Graham-Cassidy plan so long as there was enough time for a hearing, debate, and votes on amendments from both parties. Three weeks is not much time, but it is enough to debate a bill whose basic framework has been public for most of the year and which leaves the key decisions up to the states. It's certainly better than the three hours the public was given to try to fathom the skinny option. Furthermore, Nevada Republican Dean Heller, one of the Senate moderates most skeptical of the earlier bills, is an enthusiastic supporter of Graham-Cassidy's approach.

Liberals will complain that the funding formula is not generous enough and that by eliminating the individual mandate, the bill will destabilize insurance markets. But a state that likes the Obamacare model could pass its own

individual mandate. It could try high-risk pools, auto-enrollment, or a temporary lockout period for people who choose to go without health insurance. Flexibility is the selling point of Graham-Cassidy.

Conservatives will argue that the bill does not provide enough relief from Obamacare's burdensome requirements to cover people with preexisting conditions, and they have been right to identify those provisions as the main cause of Obamacare's high costs. Graham and Cassidy argue that states' ability to use the money on high-risk pools and other health care initiatives can effectively address that problem and that waivers from the secretary of Health and Human Services will help states create functional insurance markets with affordable plans that aren't subject to many of Obamacare's regulations.

Graham-Cassidy isn't entirely to our taste. We have long advocated innovative free-market reforms like the plan backed in July by Ted Cruz and Mike Lee allowing insurers to be free from Obamacare's regulations so long as they sold one Obamacare-compliant plan. This had promise for fixing the health care system nationwide. But it failed like every other option in the Senate—though Lee and Cruz are free to push for it as an amendment to Cassidy-Graham. At this point, the question for Republicans isn't whether there is a better alternative to Graham-Cassidy, but whether this plan is an improvement on the status quo. Holding out past September 30 doesn't create leverage for a better bill, it simply turns the bill to dust.

Two short years ago, in the wake of an undercover investigation that revealed America's largest network of abortionists was selling the organs of aborted babies, a wide array of Republican senators—from Mike Lee to John McCain—argued that drastic measures were needed to defund Planned Parenthood. Fund Obamacare and everything else in government except Planned Parenthood, they argued. Shut down the government if necessary, they said. Graham-Cassidy defunds Planned Parenthood and redirects the money to community health centers. If the senators' 2015 words meant anything, they will push for a vote on the bill before the end of September.

And as important as defunding Planned Parenthood is for pro-life Americans, an even greater priority is cutting off Obamacare's funding for insurance plans that cover elective abortions. The Graham-Cassidy plan just so happens to funnel the block grants through an existing health-care law to which the Hyde amendment—a measure banning federal funding of elective abortions—is permanently attached.

While Congress could pass language defunding Planned Parenthood in the next fiscal year's tax-reform reconciliation bill, the Graham-Cassidy plan is the only realistic way to stop Obamacare's funding of elective abortion.

There are, of course, many reasons to think the Graham-Cassidy plan will not pass: Time is running out, and as we went to press the two senators still hadn't released the final text of the bill. Cassidy said they intend to send it off to the Congressional Budget Office for an official score no later than September 11. Even with the vote of McCain, Republicans' 52-48 majority doesn't leave much room for error. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, having been burned over the failure in July, won't lift a finger to pass it. "Senator McConnell has said get him 50 votes, and he'll bring it to the floor," reports Cassidy. "We feel good," he says. "Never felt better about it," concurs Graham.

No one else seems to think it will pass. But it absolutely should pass.

—*The Editors*

It's Not 1981

Even before the Senate failed to pass a weak health care reform bill in mid-July, congressional Republicans were rationalizing their failure: Health care wasn't their issue, they reasoned. But tax reform—now there was something they could win with.

It sounded good, but we were skeptical. We still are.

A year ago, President Trump and Republicans on Capitol Hill spoke more about "tax reform" than "tax cuts," but in recent weeks the president has begun to use the terms interchangeably and Republicans now more frequently talk about lowering rates than simplifying the code. The White House's one-page tax plan, made public in April, includes both, but the president's emphasis is now on cuts.

It's hard to believe this administration, with its disinclination to lead and its thin Senate majority, can achieve both aims. Of the two, reforming the code seems more achievable than cutting rates—though a sizable minority of Republicans, longing as they do for another Reagan Revolution, can't see the value in any tax measure that doesn't include cuts.

Even Trump, though hardly a typical Republican, seems attached to the idea that the Reagan Revolution is repeatable via tax cuts. "Ronald Reagan proved that cutting taxes on American businesses helps American workers win in the world marketplace," he declared on September 6. "When President Reagan lowered taxes, American businesses beat out our foreign competition. Our economy boomed, the middle class thrived, and median family income increased."

Ronald Reagan's achievement on taxes was monumental. When he took office in 1981, the top marginal personal-

income tax rate was 70 percent. Eight years later, the rate had come down to 28 percent, and America had begun a period of growth like few others in modern history.

But the circumstances of 1981 do not obtain in 2017. True, the personal rate has gone up: With the expiration of the Bush tax cuts, the top rate is just shy of 40 percent. That rate could be fruitfully lowered, but it doesn't follow that cutting income taxes again will achieve comparable results. That assumption, as Yuval Levin noted in his book *The Fractured Republic*, risks "taking what were solutions to specific discrete problems of the late 1970s and treating them like abstract principles instead of concrete applications of principle to particular situations." The sluggishness of our economy has less to do with high tax rates than with overregulation and exploding costs in health care and higher education.

As a matter of practical politics, too, marginal rate cuts seem highly improbable. An esoteric budget rule in the Senate won't allow Republicans to pass a tax cut on a bare majority unless the bill can be shown not to increase budget deficits after its first decade. That means getting a few Democrats to vote for rate cuts—a doubtful scenario, to put it nicely.

Even more important, the president has shown no capacity for leading his party to accomplish a principled goal. He gave us a painful reminder of this fact on September 6, the very day on which he praised Reagan's tax cutting. As our Mike Warren reported, Trump's advisers and congressional allies urged the president to insist on a long-term funding deal rather than settle for another three-month increase in the debt ceiling, clearing the legislative calendar of anything that might impede the debate over taxes. He rejected their advice—and handed Democrats all the excuse they'll need to hold up debate on tax policy and talk about something else.

Tax reform could benefit the economy nearly as much as rate reductions, and it enjoys the kind of broad support that just might make presidential leadership unnecessary. The administration still hasn't issued a detailed plan, but the priorities it's articulated appear sound.

Eliminating most of the tax code's byzantine array of deductions, exemptions, and loopholes would undo some of the perverse incentives of the current system. Repealing the 3.8 percent tax on investment income imposed by the Affordable Care Act would get rid of a pointlessly punitive tax. Eliminating the estate tax, too, is worth trying: Democrats contend that only a few extremely wealthy individuals pay the tax, but that's because many less-than-extremely-wealthy individuals would rather sell off or break up their estates than pay an exorbitant tax on the transfer of property from one generation to another. Lowering the corporate tax rate—among the highest in the world—is a long-overdue reform that will spur job creation and investment, the tendentious counterarguments of progressives notwithstanding.

In 2017, with an ideologically rudderless president in the White House, Republicans would be wiser to aim for the feasible than to pretend it's 1981.

—*The Editors*

Did You Ever See a Dreamer Walking?

For illegals with educational ambitions, life is complicated. **BY BARTON SWAIM**

In June 2012, when President Obama issued the executive order known as DACA—“deferred action on childhood arrivals”—he had a good moral case but a bad legal one. The order allowed illegal immigrants who had entered the country as minors—people who hadn’t come to America of their own will—to apply for a work permit and a renewable two-year exemption from deportation. Public opinion is broadly sympathetic to the plight of these youngsters, and rightly so: Many of them have little or no memory of their “home” countries. “Put yourself in their shoes,” the president said when he announced DACA. “Imagine you’ve done everything right your entire life—studied hard, worked hard, maybe even graduated at the top of your class—only to suddenly face the threat of deportation to a country that you know nothing about.”

The problem, as many Republicans pointed out then and since, is that Obama had no authority to write immigration law—as indeed he implicitly admitted by issuing the executive order only *after* he couldn’t get Congress to pass the DREAM Act. (The children of illegals, or “Dreamers,” get their sobriquet from the failed Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act.) President Trump has now ordered a six-month phase-out of DACA, and the 800,000 or so beneficiaries of the program—people who’ve volunteered their names and addresses to the federal government—are again in limbo.

Congress’s failure to resolve or even address the problem of illegal residents



Javier’ posing recently with a friend

has prompted states to impose their own restrictions. These laws are defensible from a certain viewpoint: They’re intended to prevent scarce public resources from being spent on people who, though they pay sales taxes and otherwise abide by the law, don’t pay income or property taxes and are, in fact, in violation of the law. But states are ill-equipped to impose their own immigration laws—Americans aren’t required to show papers when traveling from state to state—and when states and municipalities take up this burden, the consequences are messy.

Consider the case of Javier, a long-time resident of South Carolina.

Javier (not his real name) came to America from Venezuela in 1989. He was 7 months old and has never returned. He attended public schools and after high school worked a series of jobs that didn’t require a Social Security number or a driver’s license. He repaired cars and worked in a hamburger joint and then a restaurant owned by a friend of a friend. In 2012,

DACA allowed him to get a job with a nonprofit organization, where he has applied himself and been promoted to a managerial position.

Talking with Javier, you assume he’s an average young American: He has no accent and shows no sign of unfamiliarity with American life. He also speaks in complete, literate sentences, so I ask if he ever attended college. “I got into USC,” he says. (USC is what South Carolinians call the state’s flagship university in Columbia.) “I started on a degree in computer engineering. But I had to withdraw.”

He doesn’t want to tell me the details of his withdrawal, but I press. “So this was before DACA, in 2007,” Javier says, “before I was legally allowed to enroll.” All his undocumented friends told him “just to check the box that says you’re a U.S. citizen because the university wouldn’t do anything to verify it.”

Everything went well. He couldn’t get a student ID or participate in anything that required an ID, but he didn’t mind “since I was basically there to learn, not socialize.” That lasted a year and a half. “But then in January of 2009 some law had passed—I don’t remember what it was—and all of a sudden everybody had to provide documents that proved their citizenship. I couldn’t, so I had to withdraw.”

Starting in 2012, thanks to DACA, Javier could return to the university legally, student ID and all. There was just one problem: South Carolina state schools won’t grant DACA students in-state tuition. For Javier to attend USC he would have to pay \$32,200 in out-of-state tuition costs, as against \$14,700 for in-staters. (The difference is similar at other state schools. Clemson, for instance, charges in-state students \$12,200 per year; out-of-staters pay \$33,300.) That’s well out of reach for someone like Javier who’s ineligible for state-administered scholarships. “I’d like to go back,” he says, “but it just doesn’t make economic sense to go so far into debt.” Around 20 states do offer people in his position an opportunity to attend a public university at in-state tuition costs, but moving to one of those states wouldn’t

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do him any good—the criteria for attaining in-state status are strict.

All this comes at a time when USC, like other public universities in the South, has been sharply criticized for granting tuition abatements to large numbers of out-of-state students. At USC, 42 percent of the students come from out of state, and this year the school will give away nearly a hundred-million dollars in abatements. In general, the reason is budgetary: Adding students from the academically more impressive Northeast and Midwest is an easy way to add students—and thus money—without lowering test scores.

Although Javier has lived in South Carolina for nearly his whole life and contributed to the state's revenue base while taking no welfare, he is in effect denied admittance to a state university system that welcomes kids from New Jersey and Pennsylvania as if they were home-grown.

Such tales are familiar to Donald Graham, former publisher of the *Washington Post*, who started a scholarship fund for the children of illegals. "The situation of the Dreamers in many states is almost like that of black students in 1954," Graham explains. "John Lewis grew up in Troy, Alabama, but could not even apply to Troy State. A Dreamer can be the valedictorian of a high school class, but be banned from admission to a state college."

Which brings me back to the law that forced Javier to leave college in 2009. He doesn't remember what the law was, but I do. House Bill 4400 passed into state law in June 2008. I worked for the governor who signed it. The bill's chief aim was to require employers to verify their workers' immigration status and so stop some industries from relying on cheap labor. But tucked away in the details was a provision banning "undocumented aliens" from enrolling in state universities.

I remember because I wrote the governor's talking points. "This puts South Carolina in the forefront of where other states are on immigration reform," he said at the signing ceremony. Which, unfortunately, is still true. ♦



U.S. troops on patrol in a village in Kandahar, Afghanistan, March 3, 2014

Not Too Cold, Not Too Hot

The right way to fight a generational war.

BY HAL BRANDS & PETER FEAVER

In the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, George W. Bush worried less about rallying the nation to action against the terrorist threat than about warning an enraged public that the campaign would not end anytime soon. The president referred to the emerging "global war on terror" as a generational struggle—one that would go on well past his own tenure and one that would lack an emotionally satisfying endpoint such as V-J Day or the fall of the Berlin Wall.

There were a number of things that he got wrong in the subsequent

conduct of that struggle, but this admonition was precisely right. The war on terror has now spanned nearly two decades and three presidencies with no obvious conclusion in sight. Donald Trump's speech to the nation on Afghanistan last month reminded Americans of the painfully open-ended nature of the conflict—yet it also showed that the country may have found an appropriate military strategy for waging a struggle that will almost surely outlast a third commander in chief.

Trump's speech was notable because it represented a marked evolution in his views on Afghanistan and counterterrorism strategy. Even before he emerged as a presidential candidate in 2015, Trump had harshly criticized America's long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. As president,

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SCOTT OLSON/GETTY

his initial instinct was to walk away from Afghanistan. Yet on the recommendation of his advisers, Trump ultimately—and by all accounts, reluctantly—accepted the need for a modest escalation beyond the roughly 11,000 U.S. troops now in Afghanistan, in order to intensify the campaign against extremist groups such as the Taliban, al Qaeda, and ISIS-Khorasan Province. Like Bush and Barack Obama before him, Trump came to accept that the United States cannot simply extricate itself from Afghanistan, lest the country revert to being a safe haven for jihadists seeking to carry out attacks beyond its borders; he also became the third president to endorse an essentially open-ended war on terror.

The reason for this continuity is that America's predicament in the war on terror remains roughly what it was in the wake of 9/11. For the foreseeable future, a swath of the globe from North Africa to the Middle East to South Asia will remain a fount of instability and ideological extremism. That extremism provides human fodder and an ideological rationale for terror attacks on the United States and its allies. Essentially, terrorist groups are in the business of weaponizing hatred and resentment. They leverage social media and other network tools in the virtual world while they are protected in the real world by safe havens and state sponsors. Safe havens where governments are unable or unwilling to police them and state sponsors that actively collude with extremists unfortunately remain plentiful in those parts of the world.

As the United States learned on 9/11, safe havens and state sponsors enable terrorist groups to scale up well beyond simple acts of violence. They provide an infrastructure for recruiting would-be terrorists, winnowing the recruits to find the most capable, and training the recruits to be more lethal. The United States relearned this painful lesson in 2014, when ISIS created a vast safe haven in the very heart of the Middle East, a quasi-state caliphate. Transformed by this achievement, ISIS became the most powerful terrorist group in modern times, rallying tens

of thousands of recruits to its territory and sending them back to launch and inspire attacks throughout the world.

Dealing with this threat requires passive and active defenses. Passive defenses—such as intelligence gathering and homeland security measures—are essential but limited in their results, because a passive approach cedes the tactical and strategic initiative to the enemy and cannot thwart every attack. President Trump, like Bush and Obama before him, has thus concluded that it is necessary also to go on the offensive. This means pressing the terrorists ideologically and politically, to reduce their appeal, and militarily, so they cannot plot and prepare unmolested. The military component is especially vital because it kills the most capable and hardened terrorists and denies them the safe havens that allow them to operate most effectively.

The United States has found all components of a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy challenging, but finding the right balance for the military component has been especially fraught. Since 9/11, U.S. military strategy has oscillated between two radically different approaches. At times America has pursued a heavy-footprint counterinsurgency strategy meant to decisively defeat terrorist groups while enabling the creation of effective government institutions—in other words, nation-building. At other times the United States has taken a very-light-footprint approach, relying on drone strikes and the occasional special operations raids against al Qaeda and its affiliates, along with significant assistance to friendly government forces in countries such as Yemen. In Iraq (2007-12) and Afghanistan (2009-11), Bush and Obama both found that the heavy-footprint approach produced results on the ground but at a political price they found difficult to sustain. Conversely, in Iraq (2012-14), Obama found that the light-footprint strategy proved ineffective in preventing ISIS from overrunning vast swaths of territory.

By the end of the Obama years, the United States had thus shifted toward a medium-footprint strategy

in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria alike. That strategy entailed deployments of several thousand U.S. troops involved—both unilaterally and in support of friendly partner forces—in aggressive operations meant to roll back safe havens and defeat the most dangerous extremist groups. That strategy, however, eschewed the sort of transformational nation-building attempted in Iraq and Afghanistan in earlier years, even as American officials used economic aid, diplomatic leverage, security assistance, and other tools to empower local partners and encourage marginally better governance. It is this strategy—at least in its military components—that President Trump has now embraced.

To be clear, this third-way strategy does not lack for shortcomings. It requires working patiently with deeply flawed local partners whose interests and values may be quite different from our own. It requires a willingness to support open-ended military commitments that come at a cost in lives and treasure. Not least, this strategy has no near-term “theory of victory.” It aspires to keep the threat from terrorist groups at manageable levels by punishing them militarily and clearing out their safe havens, rather than to remove the threat altogether by conclusively addressing the sociopolitical conditions from which it emanates. A medium-footprint strategy requires accepting that the war on terror will indeed go on without a clear end in sight. And although nation-building is deprioritized in this strategy, it does require working with local partners to enhance their capacity and influence their behavior at the margin.

Yet the medium-footprint strategy also boasts significant advantages. When pursued aggressively—against the Taliban and al Qaeda in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, or against ISIS more recently—it has battered these organizations and kept them off balance. The strategy is not cheap, but neither is the cost prohibitive—annual outlays for the counter-ISIS campaign have averaged around \$10 billion, a small fraction of the defense budget. A medium-footprint approach

places a heavy operational burden on certain niche capabilities within the military—special operations forces and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets—but does not excessively divert the military from demanding threats posed by conventional great powers like Russia and China in the way that larger-footprint operations did in the decade after 9/11. This strategy thus offers a reasonable prospect of dealing with the most dangerous manifestations of the terrorism problem—powerful jihadist organizations that enjoy territorial safe havens—at a manageable price. Compared with a heavy-footprint approach that is too expensive to be sustainable and a light-footprint approach that risks alleviating the pressure on the enemy, a middle-of-the-road strategy doesn't look half bad.

And this approach easily bests the out-of-the-box option Trump considered: outsourcing the war to private contractors. Relying on private military contractors to do the fighting and

training does not eliminate the financial cost of the war. Taxpayers would still be paying someone to fight, and the U.S. government would still be holding the bag if things went awry.

Although some critics have seized on Trump's speech as simply more of the same militarized approach to the war on terror and called for the United States to begin disengaging from both Afghanistan and that broader conflict, they have rarely answered the hard questions about what would happen if American officials followed their advice. What are the chances that Afghanistan would revert to the terror-breeding conditions of the late 1990s or that Iraq might once again become catastrophically vulnerable to an ISIS-like group, absent persistent U.S. military engagement in those countries? What might the butcher's bill be in a scenario in which terrorist groups again dominated large swaths of territory and were left to plan and operate in relatively safety? What kind of recruiting and financial bonanza

would the terrorists groups reap if the United States finally fulfilled Osama bin Laden's prophecy and showed itself to be the weaker horse? The answers to such questions are not knowable with any precision. But the price that the United States has paid over the past 20 years when it allowed such conditions to emerge provides little reason to think such concerns can simply be waved away.

The essence of strategy is choosing among imperfect alternatives, and a medium-footprint approach of ongoing military pressure is the best of the bad options when it comes to terrorism. Yet if President Trump thus got the military policy basically right in his Afghanistan speech, he would do well to understand that he got some of the resourcing and a key part of the rhetoric wrong.

First, even the more modest ambition of constructively influencing host-nation governments at the margin is likely to be compromised if the Trump administration proceeds with plans to

Free Speech is Under Assault on College Campuses

Take a Stand for Campus Free Speech

College campuses should be places where freedom to think and learn is unassailable. But this past year, concerned citizens have watched as colleges have become places where free speech is under daily attack by censors who are ready to silence anything that challenges their ideology.

A new set of campus rules has emerged that has little to do with educating young minds and much more to do with enforcing political correctness. At **Yale**, students waged furious protests after a professor criticized attempts to regulate Halloween costumes. At **Middlebury**, students disrupted the invited remarks of social scientist Charles Murray—and assaulted their own political science professor for attempting to

host a dialogue with him. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, George Will, and Ben Shapiro were “disinvited” from

Brandeis, Scripps, and DePaul, respectively. The list goes on and on.

On too many college campuses, students, faculty, and administrators expect freedom from speech, not freedom of speech.

This is no way to prepare students for adulthood.

The good news is that the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) is fighting back. We work with alumni, parents, and donors across the country to stand up against these practices that betray America's long tradition of free expression and liberty.

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gut the State Department, foreign aid programs, and other nonmilitary components of American power.

Second, promising victory over the terrorists—as President Trump did—is a recipe for disappointment. For a medium-footprint approach will not bring about anything like a decisive strategic victory—not until the countries of the greater Middle East and

South Asia sort out the internal problems that fuel jihadist extremism in the first place. At best, this approach will provide an acceptable if imperfect level of security in an age of enduring terror. That may not sound like much, nearly two decades after the war on terror began. But it may be the best that the United States can hope to achieve at a politically acceptable price. ♦

by Laffer that frowns on the border-adjustment tax, a proposal of the Big 6, has circulated at the White House.

The fourth Big 4 member is Steve Moore, who's been active in pushing what he calls "three easy pieces." It consists of a deep reduction in the corporate tax rate, repatriation of overseas profits by American companies, and a doubling of the standard deduction to relieve the tax burden on the middle class.

When the Big 4 came together in 2015, their plan was to advise each of the 17 Republican presidential candidates. And they came close to helping all on their tax agendas. Laffer, for example, advised Ted Cruz. Their advice focused on tax cuts to spur investment, job creation, and growth.

Kudlow and Laffer handled this task for Trump. Both are believers in incentives for growth, which were central to the tax cuts of John F. Kennedy and Reagan.

The breakthrough with Trump was late in arriving. The Big 4 hadn't taken him seriously as a candidate, much less a president. But when Moore and Kudlow were asked in March 2016 by aide Corey Lewandowski to meet with Trump, they accepted.

They were surprised Trump already had a plan, one they liked. They were surprised again to discover he had a firm grasp of tax issues. After their first session, they concluded, in Moore's words, that "this guy can actually win." They committed themselves to "legitimizing" his tax ideas and candidacy.

To Trump's plan, they added expensing, the immediate deduction of the full cost of capital expenses such as new factories and equipment—this to accelerate business investment. And they sold Trump on killing the "death tax," the federal inheritance tax.

"I'm a supply-sider," Trump told them. He insisted his tax proposal "can't be a cut for people like me." A true supply-sider wouldn't have insisted on that, but Trump returned to

The Big 4

Trump's tax-cut kibitzers.

BY FRED BARNES

In tax reform, the negotiators from the Trump administration and Congress who are thought to be in charge are called the Big 6 by Washington insiders. But there's also a Big 4, a group of supply-side economists who are playing an influential role.

The Big 4—they call themselves the Committee to Unleash Prosperity—have no official status. They don't need it. They have something better. President Trump knows all four and likes to talk to them about the economy and taxes.

And things seem to be heading their way. With time running out for Congress to consider a massive tax bill, the Big 4 want Trump to go for tax cuts alone this year and leave reform of the tax code to 2018. The Big 6 remain committed to enacting both cuts and reform this fall.

One of the Big 4, Larry Kudlow, was invited several weeks ago to speak at a White House luncheon by Gary Cohn, the head of the National Economic Council. Trump didn't attend, but when he heard Kudlow was there, he

summoned him twice for private chats. They talked for 45 minutes.

The president has also been known to ask "Where's Laffer?" when the subject of taxes comes up. Art Laffer



was an architect of President Reagan's tax cut, which touched off a surge in economic growth in the 1980s. He has met repeatedly with Trump.

Steve Forbes hasn't personally visited the White House to talk about taxes since Trump was inaugurated. But his opposition to a border-adjustment tax on imports is well known from his writings in *Forbes* magazine. He disparages it as a national sales tax. A study

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MARK SIMONE VIA TWITTER

the point often in their meetings, Kudlow said. It would be bad politics. Kudlow and Moore suggested doubling the standard deduction “so that most filers wouldn’t have to itemize and we could simplify taxes that way.”

Kudlow and Moore were the first to advocate a straight tax cut with reform coming later. But it wasn’t until a column by the Big 4 appeared in the *New York Times* in April (“Why Are Republicans Making Tax Reform So Hard?”) that the idea got traction. Trump’s reaction that he wanted his tax bill to look like the Big 4’s was widely reported.

Besides reiterating their tax proposals, the column also argued for funding a bold infrastructure program including “modernizing the electric grid and broadband access.” Forget tax reform in 2017. “Jobs and the economy are the top priority to voters,” they said.

Trump liked all this, but the Big 6 haven’t signed on. And they especially oppose the Big 4 suggestion not to require the tax bill to be revenue neutral. Otherwise it would add to the deficit.

The Big 4 say this would diminish the impact of the tax cuts. However, it would mean their tax cuts would not be permanent, lasting 10 years like the cuts of President George W. Bush.

The Big 6 matter. They are drafting the White House tax measure that Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin has said will be released shortly. The Big 6 are Mnuchin, Cohn, House speaker Paul Ryan, Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell, House Ways and Means Committee chairman Kevin Brady, and Senate Finance Committee chairman Orrin Hatch.

Ryan and McConnell back revenue neutrality. So do an unknown number of Republican senators, including Rob Portman of Ohio. But the bill, Portman told Fox News, “ought to use dynamic scoring, meaning a macroeconomic score that assumes that good tax policies actually might change behavior. And it will.” If so, it would project higher revenues from increased growth and a greater chance of avoiding a higher deficit even while cutting taxes.

Trump favors a big tax cut. His original plan in last year’s presidential

race projected a deficit of \$6 trillion. But later in the campaign that was narrowed to a revenue loser of \$2 trillion over 10 years. Moore says the revenue boost from a large cut could take care of that deficit.

The president is unlikely to make a deal with Democrats on tax cuts, as he did on the debt hike. Democrats want to raise taxes. It’s in their DNA. So far as we know, it’s not in Trump’s. And he’s the Big 1. ♦

Forecast: Gridlock

The 2018 outlook.

BY JAY COST

A year from now will mark the start of the traditional campaign season for the 2018 midterms—which will see all the seats in the House of Representatives plus a third of the Senate up for grabs. Obviously, these contests are too far away to estimate results, but a general outline is coming into focus, and it looks to be

job approval was still above 60 percent. The real question is whether the GOP will lose enough seats to threaten their majority, which stands at 240 to 194. Democrats would have to win 24 seats to take control of the House.

The major election handicappers—Stuart Rothenberg, Larry Sabato, and Charlie Cook—all see about 50 Republican seats being in jeopardy. Working in the GOP’s favor, though, is the fact that only a handful of members have so far chosen to retire—although the number could rise. Open seats, in which neither candidate is the incumbent, tend to be the best pickup opportunities for the opposition. And so far, the Democrats do not have a lot of those.

However, the national mood clearly favors the Democrats. President Donald Trump’s job approval rating remains under 40 percent, and the Gallup poll finds him at just 32 percent among self-identified independents, a very precarious number. Trump’s weak standing seems to be putting pressure on congressional Republicans. The “generic ballot” poll—in which respondents are asked if they plan to vote for a Democrat or Republican for Congress—shows a healthy Democratic lead of around 8 points among registered voters.

Optimists on the right may be tempted to dismiss the idea that



Jeff Flake campaigning in Arizona, May 30

a good cycle for the Democrats, though likely not good enough to overcome the gridlock that has gripped Washington for most of the last decade.

Democrats should gain seats in the lower chamber. Majority parties almost always shed seats in the first midterm elections after they gain the White House; the sole postwar exception was 2002, when President George W. Bush’s

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Democrats can win back the House. After all, they are lurching leftward, far outside the views that facilitated their 2006 midterm victory or even Barack Obama's pseudo-centrist campaign of 2008. But that need not matter. If Democrats recruit good candidates in the 50 or so competitive GOP seats—if they find people who are a good fit for their communities—the image of the national Democratic party is not going to be that influential in these races. Winning a net 24 seats in a midterm is no mean feat. Yet the Democrats have a real shot at it.

The Senate, on the other hand, looks much better for Republicans. Because only a third of the Senate is up for reelection in any cycle, the fate of each party depends heavily on the calendar. In 2018, the calendar decisively favors the GOP. This is “Class 1” of the Senate, those who were elected in 2012, 2006, and 2000. All of those years saw Democratic gains in the upper chamber—meaning that the handful of Republican seats in this class are among the most secure in the country. The GOP is defending seats in Arizona, Mississippi, Nebraska, Nevada, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming, plus a special election in Alabama this December. Every one of these states except Nevada has been reliably Republican on the presidential level for at least a generation.

Meanwhile, Class 1 includes a whopping 25 Democrats (counting the 2 nominal independents who caucus with them). This is the downside of picking up those seats 6, 12, and 18 years ago. Democrats now have a surfeit of seats that need defending, many in states won by Trump: Florida, Indiana, Michigan, Montana, Missouri, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Wisconsin, and West Virginia.

Of course, the forces aiding the Democrats in their effort to capture the House will likewise hamper the GOP's quest to pad its Senate majority. Trump, simply put, is too unpopular at this point for most of these seats to be competitive. Instead, the real action will probably be in the deep-red states—Indiana, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota, and West Virginia.

Complicating matters for Republicans is the peculiar case of Arizona's Jeff Flake. Perhaps the most outspoken anti-Trumper in the Senate caucus last year, Flake has continued to criticize the president and the GOP more generally—including in his new book *The Conscience of a Conservative*. This is not a good recipe for winning a Republican primary, and sure enough Flake is trailing in polls to Republican challenger Kelli Ward, who lost handily to John McCain in 2016. Even if Flake manages to win the primary, the general election is no guarantee.

His strong opposition to Trump has not endeared him to Arizona Democrats, who will no doubt strongly support Rep. Kyrsten Sinema should she decide to run.

Despite the uncertainties, the GOP has to be considered the favorite to retain control of the Senate, at least nominally. An effective majority is another matter altogether. After all, the GOP caucus right now hinges on two moderates, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Susan Collins of Maine, as well as the unpredictable John McCain of Arizona. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell cannot get much of anything done with the current caucus of 52 members, thanks to these 3. He will accomplish even less if it shrinks to 50 or 51 seats.

And should the Democrats win control of the House, their majority would probably not be overwhelming. Combine an evenly divided House with the fact that President Trump will retain the veto pen through at least 2020, and the prescription for 2018 and beyond becomes fairly obvious: gridlock and lots of it.

For Beltway pundits, who love to see Congress pass legislation just for the sake of it, this will no doubt be a fount of endless think pieces on the broken nature of our government. But is this not a reflection of the people themselves? We are, after all, closely divided—and neither party has offered a plan of governance that has been able to draw and maintain clear majorities at the ballot box. And while most everybody adores the idea of bipartisan cooperation in theory, in practice it is hard to identify subjects on which public opinion is sufficiently firm and fixed that the two sides could join together.

Republicans have benefited over the last eight years, not because the country embraced GOP policy ideas, but because of a vague dissatisfaction with the status quo. This discontent remains, and Democrats are set to reap the bounty. But the result in terms of policy victories will be virtually nil—because our government, as fractious and divided as it may be, is a fairly accurate mirror of the people. ♦

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The EAGLE and the LOON

Why Argue About a Day Off?

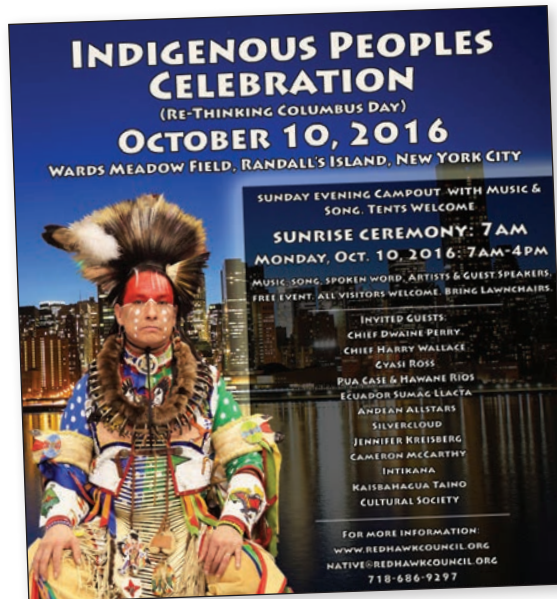
There's no such thing as an uncontroversial federal holiday. **BY PHILIP TERZIAN**

We Americans are a resilient people, but like resilient people everywhere, we need the occasional interlude of rest and relaxation. Which is why after two weeks of something like a national nervous breakdown over equestrian statues of Robert E. Lee, we welcomed the approach of Labor Day, the traditional end-of-summer federal holiday that offered a three-day respite from drama.

Of course, the historic origins of Labor Day are lost in the mists of time, journeys home from the beach, and Toyotathons. Originally observed as a local tribute to the burgeoning labor union movement, Labor Day became a federal holiday during the administration of President Grover Cleveland (1894). The fact that less than 7 percent of workers in the private sector now belong to a labor union has not gone unnoticed—in the past few decades, union growth has been almost exclusively among government employees—but the persistence of Labor Day as a federal holiday represents the great American habits of adaptation and historical amnesia. Labor Day is now largely a three-day ritual interlude, signifying the unofficial commencement of another school year.

Yet there is trouble on the horizon. With Labor Day safely behind us, Americans are confronted with the uncomfortable fact that the next federal holiday on the swift-moving calendar

(October 9) is Columbus Day, another late-19th-century inspiration now sunk deep in political controversy. Christopher Columbus used to be celebrated as the 15th-century Genoese adventurer-explorer who, seeking a seafaring trade route to China under the patronage of the Spanish throne, stumbled onto the island of San Salvador in the Bahamas.



A 2016 New York City Indigenous Peoples' Day flyer

To be sure, he was not the first European to set foot on the American continent (hello, Leif Erikson!) but the Columbian expeditions were the first to take root in the New World.

Up until fairly recently, the European discovery of the Americas was regarded as a milestone in Western civilization, and Columbus was embraced by Italian-Americans as a national hero. But the latest interpretation of these events—that Columbus was an imperialist/genocidal buccaneer who

brought disease, Christianity, and capitalism to America's aboriginal inhabitants—will be familiar to anyone with some knowledge of current scholarly dogma. Accordingly, beginning with Berkeley in 1992, forward-looking cities and states across the country have moved to supplant Columbus Day with an Indigenous Peoples' Day. Even the Italian-American mayor of New York seems prepared to discard the statue of Christopher Columbus and his eponymous circle, in Manhattan, focus of the annual Columbus Day parade in honor of his fellow Italian-Americans.

Indeed, a hurried glance at the federal calendar suggests that the discord will only intensify as the weather grows colder. Hard on the heels of Indigenous Peoples' Day comes Thanksgiving, another sentimental observance of the English "encounter" with native tribes in Virginia and Massachusetts—which, of course, led to European expansion throughout the continent, internal conflict, the founding of the American republic, Manifest Destiny, and all that bad stuff. And Thanksgiving is followed by Christmas, a winter holiday in the Christian calendar marking the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, a religious milestone that is also a federal holiday in our increasingly secular state.

Observers may detect a pattern here: Objections to popular federal holidays tend to emanate from the political left; and as such cultural things go, the left often gets its way in due course. But there are other complications. The birthday of George Washington, for example, used to be a federal holiday that enjoyed widespread sanction in the land where he was traditionally regarded (in the words of Robert E. Lee's father) as "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." But not necessarily: Washington's status as a Southern slaveholder and promoter of westward expansion has called his various monuments and memorials into question. And in any case, passage of the Uniform Monday Holiday

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Act (1968)—which was intended to grant workers a reliable series of three-day weekends—effectively transmuted Washington’s Birthday into Presidents’ Day, on which Americans honor every commander in chief, from Washington and Abraham Lincoln to Franklin Pierce and Jimmy Carter. Indeed, the



The focus of New York’s Columbus Circle

only individual in American history whose date of birth is now a federal holiday is neither Lincoln nor Washington, nor Susan B. Anthony nor Walt Whitman, but the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

It would be tempting, at this juncture, to suggest that the only federal holidays devoid of impassioned dissent are the Fourth of July (on which the national consensus holds for the moment) and, perhaps, Veterans Day and Memorial Day. But of course, Memorial Day was originally intended to commemorate the Civil War dead—which, presumably, includes soldiers of the Confederacy—and Veterans Day grew from an observance of the World War I armistice into an all-purpose tribute to American armed forces. If the Pilgrim Fathers and Jamestown settlers now find themselves on the wrong side of history, how long will veterans be exempt from revision? ♦

Academic Gabfest

Among the political scientists.

BY MARK HEMINGWAY

San Francisco

In Donald Trump’s America, political science departments are so beside themselves about what’s happening that they aren’t even pretending they’re relevant anymore. At the 2017 meeting of the American Political Science Association (APSA) in San Francisco over Labor Day weekend, the theme is “The Quest for Legitimacy.” Perusing APSA’s 427-page, phone-book-sized program, though, one gets the impression that it’s less a quest than a saunter with an indeterminate destination.

The program does helpfully summarize APSA’s anti-harassment policy, elaborating its commitment to providing a safe and welcoming environment for “all participants, regardless of actual or perceived gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, socioeconomic status, age, or religion.” But mostly it lists the hundreds of panel discussions, lectures, and papers that are the meat and potatoes of APSA’s annual gatherings. There are some worthy subjects that fell under the rubric, such as “Study of Medieval Political Thought: The Quest for Legitimacy in the Middle Ages.” There is the requisite academesque: “Varieties of Interpretive Research: From Trump to Transylvania.” There is also an undercurrent of anger: “Disavowing Violence: Imperial Entitlements, From Burke to Trump (F— That Guy).”

Fortunately, there is at least one panel that takes the quest for legitimacy seriously. In a tiny room in a far corner of the Hilton Union Square is a discussion on “The Uncertain Legitimacy of Foreign Policy Experts.” The panel is notable because it contains two academic stars, or at least stars

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by the standards of academic political science: Daniel Drezner of Tufts University (a columnist for the *Washington Post*) and Tom Nichols, a Naval War College professor who recently landed at number 13 on *Politico*’s list of “50 ideas blowing up American politics (and the people behind them).”

Not coincidentally, both wrote books in the last year that address the distrust between Americans and intellectuals: Drezner’s *The Ideas Industry* and Nichols’s *The Death of Expertise*. Aside from being popular writers, they are unusual among academics for leaning at least somewhat to the right. Nichols is a Greek Orthodox Christian and Republican, albeit an avowed Never Trumper. Drezner formally left the GOP in protest over Trump in July.

Neither hesitates to assign blame to liberal academics for bringing delegitimization upon themselves. “Robert Jervis, who’s considered a peerless international relations scholar, wrote that it makes a difference to our research that most of us are liberals, and I think that’s incontrovertible,” Drezner tells the panel. “I think it leaves political science vulnerable to a standard conservative critique, not to say that our scholarship is necessarily warped in any way. But if a political scientist that’s at variance with, let’s say, what conservatives want to believe . . . all they have to say is, ‘That is an elitist, out-touch-academic who is way to the left of the political spectrum and has no understanding what the needs of the real people are.’ And you know what? There’s going to be a grain of truth to that, even if the scholarship is rock solid.”

Still, Drezner holds out hope for a way to recapture public reverence for intellectual leadership. “Trump might make political science great again,” he says. “Because, as it turns out, he

SPENCER PLATT / GETTY

is articulating ideas that are so stupid, they are so preternaturally dumb, that whether you go from the liberals or conservatives, you are actually going to have consensus that ‘Gee, this idiot is wrong.’” Of course, there is no consensus yet among voters on whether calling Trump’s agenda dumb represents an authoritative opinion or condescension.

For his part, Nichols notes that it’s not a coincidence that the relevance of the academy has declined hand in hand with lowering academic standards. Nichols is a Russia expert, trained among the last generation of Cold War Sovietologists who regarded their expertise as a vital national security asset, one to be held to high objective standards.

Now, Nichols observes, “tenure standards and publication standards have changed . . . [and] part of the reason this has happened is because a lot of universities have found their political science departments so unreformable that they’ve created and hived off political policy schools.” With the lack of rigor, one can be a well-credentialed political scientist without any real expertise. He describes meeting a Latin American expert who’d never been to the region, calling it an example of the increasingly common “Jesuit sex education” one receives from foreign policy experts. And he laments that there’s no longer a “normative core” in political science. “We had some things we agreed about,” he says. “War was bad, democracy was good.”

A big part of the problem is that academics simply don’t know how to talk to ordinary people, much less persuade them. “Academic political science is not preparing people to speak to the public,” he says. “There is still fundamental hostility to popularizers,” adding that among academics, “‘You write well’ is an insult. ‘Your writing is very accessible’ is said with almost a dripping tone of contempt.”

These, of course, are thoughtful reflections on the reasons for the ebbing legitimacy of political science. But to be blunt, while thoughtfulness may

sell books to a general audience, it’s not clear there’s an academic market for it. Leftist radicalism is a different story. Just after the foreign policy experts discussion there is another panel at the Hilton—“White Genocide Is Gonna Get Your Mama!”—and it is far better attended.

The title is ironic, but not in a way that is reassuring. One of the speakers, associate professor George “Geo” Ciccariello-Maher, was censured by his employer, Drexel University, after tweeting last December, “All I want for Christmas is white genocide.” He followed that up with “To clarify: when the whites were massacred during the Haitian revolution, that was a good



APSA attendees—listeners and protesters—at a presentation by former George W. Bush administration official John Yoo

thing indeed.” Ciccariello-Maher says the tweets were meant to draw attention to the belief among racists that there is some organized institutional plan to kill whites en masse. (Ciccariello-Maher has also tweeted that someone who gave up his first class seat to a uniformed soldier made him want to “vomit.”)

According to Ciccariello-Maher and his fellow panelists, this notion of impending “white genocide” is a widespread cultural meme. For instance, Columbia University professor Mark Lilla criticized the Black Lives Matter movement for using counterproductive “Mau Mau tactics” in a *New Yorker* interview last month—an allusion, Lilla specified, to a famous Tom Wolfe essay, “Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers,” whose subject was intimidation, not killing. Nonetheless, panelist

Nikhil Pal Singh characterizes Lilla’s observation this way: “Here is a serious liberal intellectual essentially saying activist groups are out there who want to kill white people.”

Princeton’s Keeanga Yamahtta Taylor weighs in with all manner of splotenic thoughts on white genocide, including that the GOP is, “in my opinion, a thoroughly racist party that . . . has completely racist policies” and that Trump (to whom no one would give a passing grade for racial sensitivity) “has unequivocally expressed sympathy, admiration, and solidarity for white supremacy in the United States.”

After their initial presentations, the panelists then take a moment to help plan a protest against another APSA speaker, George W. Bush administration official John Yoo for his role in writing memos offering legal justification for waterboarding terrorists. This will bear fruit the next day during Yoo’s panel, which is about the need to limit executive authority. A group of APSA attendees stand silently in front of the dais holding signs, and two people later charge into the ballroom yelling. Now a law professor at Berkeley, Yoo has no doubt grown accustomed to being protested and is unfazed.

The panel on white genocide has a logical, if disturbing, rhetorical end. The first question from the audience is from a grad student named Nathan from UC-Davis who wonders, “What do we do with the way that liberals have fetishized this purist notion of free speech and nonviolence?” He then suggests, “There are more confrontational ways to deal with white supremacy and violent fascists.”

Afterwards, I see Tom Nichols in the crowded lobby of the Hilton. He is chagrined, but unsurprised, by what had just transpired at the white genocide panel. More surprising, he says, is that APSA gave him a platform to critique political science from the right. “Twenty-five years ago, you wouldn’t have seen a panel like that, since scholars doing that kind of public engagement were risking career suicide. So that’s progress.”

◆ BRADLEY WATSON, ST. VINCENT’S COLLEGE

The Do-Not-Think Tank

*Google and other Big Tech companies
are a growing threat to open discourse*

BY CHRISTINE ROSEN

On August 30, New America president Anne-Marie Slaughter terminated the left-leaning think tank's relationship with scholar Barry C. Lynn and his Open Markets program. Slaughter says that Lynn was not abiding by New America's "standards of openness and institutional collegiality." He says he was fired for his staunch antitrust views on the biggest technology companies and, in specific, his praise for the EU's decision in June to levy a \$2.7 billion fine on Google for unfair market practices.

Lynn has studied monopolies for nearly 20 years (15 of them while based at New America). He is the author of two books on the subject, including *Cornered: The New Monopoly Capitalism and the Economics of Destruction* (2009), and numerous essays and op-eds. His work is notable for its examination not only of the economic impact of monopolies, but also of their political implications. The mission of the initiative Lynn headed at New America promises as much: "The Open Markets Program at New America was founded to protect liberty and democracy in America from extreme concentrations of economic and political power." Research topics include the growth of food and farming conglomerates; the challenges posed to small businesses; and, in recent years, the growing power of "Big Tech" companies like Amazon and Google. Journalists and politicians had been paying a great deal of attention to this work in recent years. Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren delivered the keynote address at an Open Markets conference about "America's Monopoly Problem" in June 2016, and the *New York Times* frequently cites the work of the Open Markets team in its reporting on the growth of Amazon.

So when Lynn issued a press release on June 27, 2017, congratulating the European commissioner for competition, Margrethe Vestager, for fining Google \$2.7 billion, it could hardly have come as a surprise to anyone at New America. "Google's market power is one of the most critical challenges for competition policymakers in the world today,"

Lynn wrote, and he called on U.S. regulators "to build upon this important precedent, both in respect to Google and to other dominant platform monopolists including Amazon."

Yet it was a surprise to New America's most-prominent donor, Eric Schmidt, the executive chairman of Google's parent company, Alphabet. Google and Schmidt have given more than \$21 million to New America in recent years, and Schmidt chaired the think tank's board for eight years. So displeased was he by Lynn's praise for the EU decision that, according to one of the current co-chairs of the board, Jonathan Soros, he asked to be removed as chairman emeritus. Days later, Lynn and his team of 10 full-time employees were out.

When a *New York Times* story about the ouster appeared online on August 30, Anne-Marie Slaughter immediately tweeted, "This story is false." This was followed by another tweet a few hours later saying, "Let me be clearer in an era of fake news; facts are largely right but quotes are taken way out of context and interpretation is wrong." She would later delete her first tweet.

Coming on the heels of the August firing of engineer James Damore for challenging what he described as an ideologically liberal "echo chamber" at the company, this episode has seen Google do the hardest thing possible in Washington—it's brought left and right together to question the company's power and generated a wave of anti-monopoly fervor.

The controversy also revives perennial questions about how think tanks operate: How do institutions that take tens of millions of dollars from corporations and wealthy individuals maintain their integrity? Can policymakers and the public trust the research that emerges? And in an age that demands transparency, in which missteps and scandals are instantly magnified thanks to social media, how can research institutions pursue both relevance and rectitude?

For two years, I received financial support—\$50,000 a year—from New America to study and write about technology. After my fellowship ended in 2014, I was invited to continue my relationship with the foundation as an unpaid Future Tense fellow, part of a team that sponsored debates, panels, and book events

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on technology-related subjects in conjunction with Arizona State University and *Slate*. Everyone I know at New America is hardworking and intellectually curious.

Steve Coll was president when I joined the foundation, and I recall him emphasizing that as a fellow, I would face no interference with my work. I never did. The intellectual freedom and the generous money offered by New America make such fellowships deeply coveted. Giving people (mainly journalists but also independent scholars) who usually have pressing deadlines the time and space to work on more slowly developing projects is of immense value.

I used to joke that I was a token at the think tank not because of my conservative political views (though the overwhelming majority of folks on staff at New America lean left) but because of my skepticism about the blue-skies promises made by technology companies. At Future Tense events, in my writings, and during internal New America meetings, I never once felt pressure to moderate my views; indeed, on many occasions I was encouraged to make my criticism as public as possible to balance out the rampant techno-enthusiasm of my colleagues. Other former fellows, such as Evgeny Morozov and Franklin Foer, also pursued projects during their time at New America that directly challenged the pretensions of Big Tech (a fact that Slaughter would repeatedly cite when responding to the backlash over Lynn's firing).

After news of the Open Markets team's ouster at New America broke on August 30, I spoke to current and former fellows about what had happened. Most were shocked about how the immediate situation had been handled and despondent over what the fallout would mean for both the reputation of the institution and their own work. The next morning, I resigned my position as a Future Tense fellow.

On September 2, a group of 25 current and former fellows sent a letter to New America's board outlining our concerns about the ouster of the Open Markets program and asking questions about Google's role at the foundation. Our point was that freedom from donor influence was indispensable to fellows' individual credibility as well as that of the institution.

Slaughter quickly moved from aggressive tweeting to damage control. She posted a defensive explanation of the firing of Lynn on the website Medium, maligning him as

a colleague while claiming to be brave enough to speak the "truth" even though it was "messy and hard." She went so far as to claim that Lynn's new organization—Open Markets had quickly re-formed as an independent non-profit called Citizens Against Monopoly—was "the opening salvo of one group of Democrats versus another group of Democrats in the run-up to the 2020 election, at a time when I personally think the country faces far greater challenges of racism, violence, a broken political system, and geographic and partisan divisions so great that we are losing any common sense of what we stand and strive for as a country." Faced with ethical scrutiny of her leadership, Slaughter tried to distract people by pointing to racism and violence in American society.

There were a few positive comments made about Slaughter's Medium article, including one from New America board member James Fallows, who said it "recognizes big issues" and "details of this case less pat than they may seem." But the overwhelming reaction was negative. It was summed up best by a commentator on the site, "Democracy Expert," who posted as succinct reaction the Latin tag *Res ipsa loquitur*. "The thing speaks for itself."



Eric Schmidt and Anne-Marie Slaughter at a New America conference in Washington, May 2016

Leading a think tank is a challenging task that marries the petty fiefdoms and grievances of academia with a constant pressure to raise money. Today's think tank president or CEO isn't merely a manager; he or she is expected to be a media-savvy public intellectual (or "thought leader" if you prefer Silicon Valley lingo), making regular appearances on television and in op-ed pages while cultivating a large following on social media. The pay for the job is handsome; Slaughter earns more than half a million dollars a year at New America.

Eric Schmidt recruited Slaughter in 2013 when he was chairman of New America's board of directors. The board wanted a higher profile for the organization, and the former dean of Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, who had served as director of policy planning under Hillary Clinton at the State Department, seemed the perfect hire.

Slaughter dropped "Foundation" from New America's name and exchanged the group's dowdy offices for sleeker digs, complete with a large conference room called the Eric Schmidt Ideas Lab. New America's annual meetings started

adopting the slick optics of a TEDx conference, with speakers such as Hillary Clinton, Elizabeth Warren, and Jeff Flake featured alongside business leaders like Kevin Martin, a vice president at Facebook, and David Wiley, the chief academic officer of Lumen Learning. Rhetoric about how New America was tackling the problems of the “Digital Age” cropped up more and more frequently. “New America is committed to renewing America in the Digital Age, though a combination of big ideas, technology and policy,” Slaughter said in 2016, in a typical press release.

Every Washington think tank rebrands itself every few decades—and nearly every one has its share of internal Machiavellian intrigue and scandal related to funding. In 2014, the *Washington Post* asked “Who funds the new Brookings?” and outlined how the city’s oldest think tank, the Brookings Institution, had pursued an aggressive money-raising strategy that included soliciting donations from corporations and foreign governments, including more than \$20 million from Qatar. The *New York Times* also uncovered increased foreign money flowing into think tanks such as the Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Atlantic Council.

Ken Silverstein wrote a lengthy exposé in the *Nation* in 2013 outlining the many corporate and foreign donors to the progressive Center for American Progress (founded in 2003 by John Podesta, a White House chief of staff during the Clinton administration) and asked, for example, why CAP had not disclosed the money it received from alternative-energy companies when one of its fellows was praising those companies in congressional testimony. Silverstein argued that think tanks “effectively serve as unregistered lobbyists.”

The question he was really asking, however, is the one that bedevils every leader of a think tank: How do you measure influence?

The think tank appeared in Washington in the early 20th century thanks to the largesse of a few individuals—Andrew Carnegie set up the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, for example, and Robert Brookings launched the Brookings Institution. These were avowedly nonpartisan and scholarly in their focus, with a mission to educate the public and the political class about a range of policy issues. Over the century, the number of think tanks grew exponentially and includes specialized groups such as the RAND Corporation and the Council on Foreign Relations as well as more political ones like the right-leaning American Enterprise Institute and

Heritage Foundation and the libertarian Cato Institute. And although often on opposing sides of policy debates, they operated along similar lines: churning out policy papers and serving as comfortable way stations for White House officials when their party was out of power. (These were the days before former presidents left office with lavishly funded personal foundations where they migrated with their staffs to continue to “lend our wisdom,” as the home page of the Obama Foundation boasts.)

Think tanks used to have straightforward measurements of their clout: They would point to legislation that relied on their research, books published by their scholars, and commentary by their staffers in newspapers or on television. Most also employed a few key figures who didn’t generate a lot of earned media, generally men and women with long tours of duty in government or the academy whose experience at the highest levels guaranteed they were people of substance.

Today it is harder to be heard above the relentless hum of information, and there is more competition for attention and resources. As a result, think tanks have started to function more like brands than quasi-academic institutions.

But the corporatization of think tanks, like the corporatization of higher education, has consequences for what those institutions produce and for how they treat the people who work for them. In higher education, corporatization has created bloated, expensive college administrations that cater to the whims of their “customers” (what students are called these days). In the think tank world, references to a scholar’s influence on the world of ideas have given way to metrics and jargon and management-speak about “deliverables” and “returns on investment” and “synergy.”

Development departments within think tanks have also gained in influence; at many places, including New America, administrators sit in on discussions of scholars’ work, the better to coordinate fundraising efforts. Silverstein reported that CAP fellows told him they “were very clearly instructed to check with the think tank’s development team before writing anything that might upset contributors.” These tensions exist in think tanks regardless of where they rest on the political spectrum; the leadership meltdown at the Heritage Foundation this spring, which led to the ouster of its president, exposed serious disagreements about how politically engaged the think tank should be and how its political efforts should be funded.

You don’t have to agree with a single word that Barry Lynn and his colleagues said or wrote about monopolies to understand that what happened to them at New America will have a chilling effect on the work of others—and not just in think tanks.

So why is New America receiving sudden scrutiny for what think tanks have been doing for years? Some of the outrage can be explained by the fact that even people unfamiliar with the think tank world interact with Google on a daily basis, unlike with, say, Qatar. Stories about Google's influence are international news. But it's also that tech companies like Google have become formidable powers in Washington in a short span of time—pouring money into both progressive and conservative think tanks while also spending heavily on more traditional lobbying efforts focused on Capitol Hill.

During the Obama administration, Google representatives were at the White House constantly; more than once a week, on average, from the time the president took office until October 2015, according to the *Intercept*, and approximately 250 people went from working for Obama to working for Google (or vice-versa). The company's lobbying efforts show no signs of abating with the Trump administration, either. As the *Washington Post* reported in July, Google "spent the most it ever has in a single quarter trying to influence elected officials in Washington," according to lobbying disclosure forms. Companies such as Apple, Amazon, and Uber have followed suit.

This, combined with Silicon Valley's oft-stated contempt for the slow and messy business of

public-policy-making, should have people concerned—even those of us who defend a free market in which businesses are allowed to pursue and defend their self-interests.

Yet the gravest danger is not the heavy hand of Big Brother but self-censorship. You don't have to agree with a single word that Barry Lynn and his colleagues said or wrote about monopolies to understand that what happened to them at New America will have a chilling effect on the work of others—and not just in think tanks.

Google, Facebook, and the other large technology companies fund a great deal of academic research. As NPR technology reporter Aarti Shahani reported the day after the New America story broke, "Yesterday, I called people whom I know get money from Google. I spoke with this one professor who was like, 'You know, there's an area of research I've thought about doing to look at the Communications Decency Act, which basically protects Google and other Internet companies from being liable for fake news and slander.' The professor's not touching it because [he] gets money from Google." The Google Transparency Project, a nonprofit organization, found more than 300 research papers published between 2005 and 2017 "on public policy matters of interest to Google that were in some way funded by the company," for which Google spent many millions. "Academics did not disclose the Google

Progress on Limiting Health Insurance Costs Still Possible

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

Just because the reconciliation effort to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act (ACA) has been eclipsed in Washington—for now—doesn't mean that consumers all over the country aren't feeling the pain of the law's shortcomings. Premiums continue to rise and choices in the individual market continue to dwindle.

Fortunately, there are at least two critical actions Congress could take to help stabilize Obamacare's exchanges.

First, Congress should fully fund cost sharing reduction (CSR) payments, and the administration must continue to provide them. The ACA mandated that insurers reduce out-of-pocket costs for certain low income individuals in exchange for compensation through CSR payments. If the administration ends these payments, insurers will still be required to limit out-of-pocket costs

but may have to raise premiums by as much as 20%. Washington is actively talking about preserving these payments. Now it's time to get this done.

A second priority, which to date has received less attention from policymakers, is extending the suspension of Obamacare's health insurance tax (HIT). Originally part of Obamacare, the HIT was suspended in 2015 but under current law will be reinstated next year, slamming a \$14.3 billion fee on millions of health insurance policies. Individuals, families, seniors, and small businesses will pay the price in higher premiums. According to one study, reimposing the tax would hit families in the small group market, which serves many small businesses, with a \$500 increase. Seniors enrolled in Medicare Advantage would also see \$245 more in costs. But if the HIT is repealed, it will save individuals and families up to \$6,675 over the next 10 years.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce is working to build public awareness of the looming HIT, and we urge all lawmakers to stop it in its tracks. I doubt that many lawmakers will want to explain why they allowed a tax on health insurance to take effect. While we ramp up pressure on both the HIT and CSR payments, we will continue pressing for action on other health care priorities—namely, the medical device tax and the so-called Cadillac tax on premium insurance plans.

Businesses across the country are wondering what will happen next with health care. Congress and the White House must do all they can in the short term to ensure that our existing health care system is as stable as possible. But soon our leaders will have no choice but to offer a new vision for American health care—and the Chamber will be ready to help when the time comes.



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

funding in nearly two-thirds of cases,” the group reported.

On September 6, New America hosted a lengthy all-staff meeting to discuss the previous week’s events—the meeting was declared off-the-record, which speaks volumes itself. A few minutes before it began, Jonathan Soros emailed a letter to staffers that signaled the board’s intent to stand behind Slaughter and doubled-down on her claim that it was “a pattern of behavior by Barry that merited his termination” and not Google’s role at the institution.

The letter was oddly conspiratorial in tone. Soros claimed the press coverage of New America was “the result of a targeted communications campaign” and that “the Open Markets team successfully seeded a sympathetic article in the *New York Times*.” New America, he wrote, was simply “collateral damage” of the Open Markets team’s broader challenge to Google. Although there were nods to the need for New America to explore “ways to codify standards” and plenty of praise for “transparency,” there is little evidence that, going forward, it will be anything but business as usual. And, as reported by *Wired*, in the all-staff meeting, Slaughter adopted Washington’s favorite way to make PR problems go away: promising to “form a committee to review and establish standards for interaction between donors and New America leadership.” At the meeting, one of the few voices to praise Slaughter’s handling of the crisis, according to *Wired*, was Alan Davidson, the man who launched Google’s first lobbying office in Washington in 2005 and went on to serve in Obama’s Commerce Department. Davidson, now a Public Interest Technology Fellow at New America, praised Slaughter and echoed her criticism of Lynn.

There was certainly no recognition that what drove the response to the events at New America is the same thing that has brought Google increasing skepticism from both left and right: the company’s unparalleled power. Google’s influence has grown not just in the corner of the ideas industry that includes Washington think tanks, but broadly throughout our culture. Its power and money

might lead to censorship (and self-censorship) without its ever needing to issue a directive to a think tank president.

In an ideal world, think tanks offer a place both for policy-minded scholarship and for refugees from politics, academia, and the media who might otherwise have no institutional support. At their best, they generate ideas that can improve policymaking and inform the public. But pay-for-play is a deepening ethical challenge for these institutions.



When Lynn issued a press release on June 27 congratulating the European commissioner for competition, Margrethe Vestager, for fining Google \$2.7 billion, it could hardly have come as a surprise to anyone at New America.

In 2015, *Washington Monthly* featured a lengthy article on “rethinking the think tank.” In it, a pair of writers lamented the political polarization of think tanks in a hyperpartisan era and argued that “a plethora of specialized research institutions funded by trade associations, corporations, and partisan donors on both right and left have led many to question the objectivity of the policy positions adopted.”

The solution proposed was a wonky restatement of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg’s mantra, “Move fast and break things.” Think tanks should embrace a “minimum viable policy product” in their work, the authors argued. “That’s a meaningful bit of jargon that adapts the hugely successful Silicon Valley concept of bringing products to market just as quickly as they can be made into semi-usable form. Spending years debating a policy problem without concrete proposals for change can alienate people. We have to be

quicker to offer proposed solutions.” This approach, they noted, had the added benefit of being “far less susceptible to the appearance (or reality) of quid pro quo funding.”

One of the writers was Ben Scott, a senior adviser at New America. The other was Anne-Marie Slaughter.

What they seem not to have realized is that “minimum viable products” rely on early adopters to test their effectiveness and offer feedback about improvements. It’s a relationship built on trust. Just like the one between think tanks and the public. If the past week’s reaction to Google’s role at New America is any guide, the trust is broken. ♦

EMMANUEL DUNAND / AFP / GETTY

Perfect Partners

*Moscow and Tehran intend to have their own way
in the Middle East*

BY REUEL MARC GERECHT

When he won election, Donald Trump—along with his national security adviser Michael Flynn, his all-purpose counselor Stephen Bannon, and, perhaps, his son-in-law, Jared Kushner—was fond of the idea that Russia and Iran, comrades-in-arms in Syria, weren't natural partners. Flynn was particularly open about his desire to create a new Moscow-Washington alignment against Islamic militants. The pro-Russia, anti-Iran crowd never explained exactly how this strategic jujitsu might be done, except to suggest that the White House might turn a blind eye—blinder than Barack Obama's—to Russian ambitions in Ukraine and work to reverse American and European sanctions levied after Vladimir Putin's annexation of Crimea.

Flynn and Bannon are gone, Congress has passed further sanctions against Russia, the administration has shuttered more of Moscow's diplomatic posts in the United States, and Trump and his family appear to be enmeshed in never-ending Russia troubles. Yet the president and others in the White House still harbor the hope that Moscow and Washington can find common ground in confronting Islamic militancy. Trump's Warsaw speech in July highlighted this transcendent fear of Islam unhinged. Syria consumed much of Trump's two-hour meeting with Putin at the G-20 summit. His recent Afghanistan speech underscored the president's intention to work with all parties against Islamic terrorism: "In this effort, we will make common cause with any nation that chooses to stand and fight alongside us against this global threat." And Putin regularly defends his intervention in Syria as a counterterrorist operation.

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Trump's Russophile inclinations may spring from many sources, but the president's focus on "radical Islamic terrorism" is surely among the most important factors in his outreach to the Russian ruler. Bureaucrats are obliged to take notice as this desired Russian-American fraternity ripples through the State Department and the intelligence community. As one senior counterterrorism official recently put it to me, "if we can see a possible [pro-]Russian angle, we flag it."

Although most Republicans in Congress remain skeptical of, if not fiercely hostile to, Putin's Russia, a growing slice of the populist and realist right appears willing to give

Putin the benefit of the doubt, in great part because of perceived common enemies. The Russians *have* been hit hard by Chechen terrorists. The 2002 Dubrovka Theater hostage crisis in Moscow and the 2004 Beslan school massacre in North Ossetia were, we are often told, searing experiences for Putin. And the Russian ruler regularly highlights the need for a more conservative Orthodox *oikoumén* to hold its own against a liberal, decadent West—a



position that appeals to many American social conservatives (Pat Buchanan loves the idea). This affinity may seem downright bizarre to anyone who has spent time in Moscow and seen how the Russian elite live (Western European leftists are vastly more "conservative"). America Firsters' flirtation with Russia surely has as much to do with their discomfort with their own society as it does with what Putin and his friends espouse. The right's anxiety about Islam—and this unease extends way beyond the Firster crowd—feeds the hope for a Russian-American front. For some, modern militant Islam might do what the Crusades could not: heal the Great Schism of 1054, when the Western and Eastern churches became bitter rivals.

Under Obama, a secularized version of this us-versus-the-jihadists vision might have floated in the background of his and Hillary Clinton's "reset" of U.S.-Russia relations, at least until Russian fighter-bombers started pulverizing

SASHA MORDOVETS / GETTY

ordinary Syrians. President Obama's outreach to Iran, whose foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, rarely opens his mouth without highlighting the need for a Western-Iranian partnership against the scourge of (Sunni) holy warriors, certainly advanced this new strategic and cultural doctrine. Trump hopefully brought Russia back and returned Iran to the radical-Islam penalty box.

But a Russian-American entente never made a lot of sense because of one overpowering fact: Russia and the Islamic Republic have deeply shared strategic interests that simply overwhelm the carrots and sticks that Washington can toss at Putin. Spiritually, Putin and the ruling elite in Tehran easily dislike the United States more than they suspiciously regard each other. Strategically, diminishing America in the Middle East is an unalloyed good for both. And Russia's relationship with the Islamic world simply can't be defined by the kind of Samuel Huntington-esque civilizational struggle that has become the lingua franca of so many on the American right.

RUSSIAN-IRANIAN SYMMETRY

Iran has never posed a strategic threat to Moscow. The Islamic Republic has never gained a foothold in the Caucasus and Central Asia outside of Tajikistan, the only Persian-speaking country in the former Soviet Union. And even in Sunni Tajikistan, anti-Iranian sentiments are widespread. When the Tajik civil war (1992-1997), pitting Westernized, post-Soviet authoritarian reformers against Westernized, post-Soviet Islamists, tore the country apart, Tehran was at a loss. As the natives started to use heavy weaponry at close quarters, Iranian diplomats and spies retreated to the Hotel Tajikistan in Dushanbe, where Russian soldiers protected them.

Until Syria, the Chechen wars were the bloodiest modern engagement in which a non-Muslim power sought relentlessly to kill large numbers of Muslim civilians. The Iranians kept their distance, only rarely rising to give rhetorical support to Sunni Muslims bombarded by Russian artillery and planes. And in the post-Soviet Armenian-Azeri conflict, the clerical regime has been a de facto Armenian ally, siding with Christians against a secular Muslim regime that is sympathetic to dissident Iranian Azeris and has a barely clandestine intelligence and military relationship with Israel.

Putin has already made the calculation that his brutal actions toward Sunni Muslims in the Caucasus and his

support of anti-Islamist rulers within the former Soviet Union and the Middle East don't cost him. He does not seem to fear Sunni Islamic radicalism within Russia: Whatever anti-Russian designs the Islamic State or al Qaeda might have, they have so far failed to launch major terrorist operations inside the Russian police state. In the last 40 years, Russians have had four run-ins with Sunni radicals: in Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion, in Chechnya twice, and now in Syria. The trying experience of the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989) didn't teach Russians that they shouldn't wage wars in Muslim lands. This may be a reflection of Russian demographics: Upwards of 15 percent of the population in territory Moscow considers Russian is

Muslim. About 90 percent of Russian Muslims are Sunni. By comparison, France, which is often seen as the European country with the most socially troubled Muslim denizens, has an Islamic community of somewhere between 5 to 7 percent of the population. Russian coexistence with Muslims is as old as any in Europe and among the most intimate. Russian bigotry against Muslims is easy enough to chronicle (I was once accosted on a Moscow street by Russian soldiers who thought I was a Muslim from the Caucasus), but Russians don't fear a fifth column, at least not sufficiently to restrain their military actions.

It bears repeating: Putin's Russia has been directly involved in the slaughter of Sunni Muslims in two of the bloodiest, civilian-consuming conflicts of the last 200 years. If you add the first Chechen-Russian War (1994-1996) and the Soviet-Afghan War, in which Moscow sought to depopulate Pashtun territory through savage helicopter-gunship assaults, the Russians are easily the atheists/Christians who've killed the most Muslims in modern times. American officials on both the left and right, let alone the intelligentsia, have been consumed since 2001 with the idea that Washington breeds terrorists through its military operations. Even Donald Rumsfeld, who must be one of the least fearful, anxious, guilt-prone U.S. officials ever, expressed concerns about the counterterrorist utility of military actions in Islamic lands. Notwithstanding the censorship of Putin's rule, the lack of public Russian ruminations about provocative actions against Muslims is striking.

This surely derives from how the Russian identity was built: in constant war with Muslims. Even more than the Spanish Reconquista, Russian expansion was first an act of liberation from Muslim dominion (the Mongols and

If you add the first Chechen-Russian War (1994-1996) and the Soviet-Afghan War, in which Moscow sought to depopulate Pashtun territory through savage helicopter-gunship assaults, the Russians are easily the atheists/Christians who've killed the most Muslims in modern times.



A Russian soldier inspects the bodies of Chechen civilians exhumed for identification in Grozny, Chechnya, March 31, 1995.

Turks of the Golden Horde) and then vengeful conquest. From Ivan the Great (1440-1505) forward, the Russians have seen countless jihads declared against them as they relentlessly subjugated Muslims across Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. No European power has lived so long with so much Muslim antipathy. This history seems to have produced a certain equanimity/*savoir-faire*/arrogance (choose) among Russians when it comes to Muslims. And the ruling Russian elite's understanding of what does, and does not, generate jihadism within Russia may be right. The Russians have also used a tactic against radical Muslims favored in the past by secular Arab dictators: They export them. If militant Muslims want to go fight in foreign lands, even if they want to go fight Russians and their allies in Syria, let them. Better they die abroad than fester at home.

Putin's alliance with Shiite Iran is a logical extension of his domestic politics. It's also a smart strategic move. The closer Russia is to the Islamic Republic, the more respect the Arab states, particularly oil-rich Gulf states, must show Russia. Secretary of State John Kerry could never quite comprehend why Putin kept insisting on acting "in a 19th-century fashion," that is, with brute force. Putin understands that 19th-century rules usually win. Middle Easterners, who have been both agents and victims of increasingly ruthless power politics since the Ottoman Empire collapsed, comprehend Putin. When push comes to shove, they know that being

feared is more effective than being liked. It's an excellent bet that when the Saudi and Emirati royals meet with Putin and his minions, they don't dwell on the awful slaughter he has wrought in Syria; they surely prefer to highlight the duplicity of the Persians and the greater economic advantages he could gain with their states.

Putin's Russia is the perfect partner for the Islamic Republic. Unlike the Soviet Union, Russia today doesn't pose an ideological temptation for Iranian youth and intellectuals. It no longer poses a geographical challenge. Iranians may whimper endlessly about the injustice of czarist conquests, ignominiously imposed by the Treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828), but there is no sentiment for recapturing lands all Iranians know are lost to Persian culture. There is no more friction, except for the occasional spat on the Caspian Sea, over who has done more to ruin caviar production. Iranian nationalism is real and vibrant, stronger today than it was in 1979, in great part because theocracy has been so unpleasant and Islamic brotherhood beyond Iran's borders has proven so illusory. The more nationalist Iranians are, the more they flinch when it comes to strategic Iranian-Russian cooperation. But for the ruling elite, who are the ones that matter, the Islamic-Iranian *mélange*, which is *the* building block of the modern Persian identity, focuses religious-nationalist anger overwhelmingly in one direction: against the West and its cutting edge, the United States.

And Iranian Shiite imperialism dovetails nicely with Putin's great-power ambitions. Russia and the Islamic Republic make a compelling couple precisely because they are not intimately intertwined: Each party knows exactly what the other brings to the relationship. Ironically, President Trump doesn't really offer Russia a transactional partnership; at heart, he proffers an airy-fairy ideal—Christians versus Muslims—that has no traction with Russians who gauge the Islamic threat and “Judeo-Christian civilization” with more discrimination and nuance than does the White House.

On perhaps the most important issue, Russia and Iran are a pair: Russian propaganda against America's insidious efforts to spread its values in the Russian realm, undermining traditional culture and the mores of the Orthodox church, is remarkably similar to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's gravamen against the morally corrupting, soft-power machinations of the United States. Russia and the Islamic Republic share a sincere if profoundly hypocritical commitment to virtue. The Russian and Iranian elites often love their vices (the Russians are surely more indulgent than Iran's Islamists, but the first and, even more, second generation of Iran's revolutionaries can impress with their thirst for “the forbidden”). Yet this behavior doesn't denote a lack of commitment to their anti-Western hostility. It probably reinforces it.

Among the most principled of peoples, Americans are often blind to the ideological drivers behind other peoples' behavior, especially after they detect what seem like vitating contradictions. In great part, this disposition stems from the West's secularization—the privatization of faith makes religion primarily a soulful endeavor and not an exercise of communitarian spirit and shared practice. Individual lapses in religious or moral commitment for Westerners are thus more deeply wounding of the identity, more likely to be seen as a slippery slope to cynical realism. In an Iranian or a Russian context, these things rend less since the public attachment to the religious-ethnic identity is less compromised by personal indiscretions, greed, or the subjugation of mores to state power. It's the

public cause—the Iranian-Islamic revolutionary creed or the greater glory of Russia—that matters most, at least for those who rule. There is no contradiction at all in Russian VIPs in Putin's circle or Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps setting up shell companies to buy property in Europe and eagerly seeking, in what approaches a divine mission, to humble the West, especially the United States. (For the Iranian ruling class, it actually *is* a divine mission.)

Iran is set to become the largest single client for Russian military hardware. Moscow finally delivered to Tehran S-300 anti-aircraft missiles, which have complicated, probably ended, any Israeli threat to the clerical regime's nuclear sites. The Russian-Iranian axis has become militarily dominant in the northern Middle East, and it seems unlikely the Trump administration will challenge this supremacy. Although Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and the White House don't always appear to be operating from the same playbook, his recent comments about the Russians deciding Bashar al-Assad's fate likely reflects the president's view that American commitments in Syria should stay small and centered on the fall of the Islamic State's capital Raqqa. Post-Islamic

State U.S. military planning will probably remain focused on counterterrorism, that is, it won't evolve into a campaign to humble Assad and his allies.

The Trump White House is on the way to defaulting to the exact same position Obama had at the end: The Assad regime and its allies will get another chance to smash the Sunni opposition. Trump's anti-Assad rhetoric sometimes inclines the listener to believe that the president wants to get tough with the dictator and his Iranian overlords. But the restrained way the president responded to Assad's use of sarin—cruise missiles at 3:40 A.M. after the Russians had been warned—doesn't suggest he really wants to check the regime, let alone force it to retreat. Neither does Trump's recent decision to end the Central Intelligence Agency's “covert” support of the ragtag Free Syrian Army, which, unlike the more substantially U.S.-aided, mostly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces, fights the Assad regime and not the Islamic State. The Free Syrian Army, like the Afghan mujahedeen battling the Soviets, has within



Russian-made surface-to-air missiles on display in Tehran

ATTA KENARE / AFP / GETTY

it anti-American holy warriors; it is a reflection of where Syrian Sunni society is: pulverized and radicalized. Shutting the CIA program, which some would argue was sensible given the dangerous constituents within, signals the administration's unwillingness to deal with the ugliness of the larger Syrian war, with the difficulties of building a powerful opposition army in which non-radicalized Muslims don't have to ally with al Qaeda & Company to survive. And what Trump has ended is unlikely to be restarted since it would require a much larger and patient deployment of U.S. airpower and American soldiers (5,000 troops is a decent guess) to filter out anti-Western jihadists and train and protect a force capable of grievously wounding the Iranian-directed militias arrayed against it.

AMERICA RESTRAINED, RUSSIA & IRAN UNLEASHED

The occasional use of American airpower to stop overeager Syrian-regime/Shiite-militia units and planes from destroying American-allied forces doesn't change the equation that has made Iran the dominant Muslim power from Iraq to the Mediterranean. Nor does the Russian deference to Israel's security concerns across its northern border. Moscow and Jerusalem have worked out a *modus vivendi* that allows the Israeli Air Force to attack facilities linked to Hezbollah and Iran too far south in Syria, as it just did on September 7. Jerusalem has neither the intention nor the capacity to push its security zone far enough north to become a big player in Syria. Nor do Israelis have any desire to test Russian air-defense systems. Although Jerusalem won't say so publicly, it has already acquiesced to Iranian supremacy in western Syria. If the Iranian-Syrian-Russian axis can take and hold the largest city of eastern Syria, Deir ez-Zor, which it is erratically attempting, it's only a matter of time before the Sunni Arab opposition effectively collapses. What seems like an impossible task—Shiite militias taking a strategic city deep in Sunni territory—may not be farfetched: If Iran and Russia decide to invest a bit of muscle, the lay of the land could change significantly.

Syria will probably remain a safe-haven for want-to-be "global" anti-Western jihadists—to clear the country, the manpower demands on Iranian-directed forces would likely be too great. And Assad, Iran, and Russia have profited enormously from using the Sunni jihadist threat with Western audiences. Why end an argument that has worked so well? But the capacity of Syrian Sunnis to coalesce in

sufficient numbers at key locations to threaten the regime will end if Deir ez-Zor falls. Tehran will likely develop a land route from Iran to Lebanon. Its strategic value may be more symbolic than real (though transport by truck is better than by plane or ship). Yet all parties in the region will understand that an Arab Sunni-American alliance, which the Trump administration has been toying with as a vehicle to pressure Iran while keeping American commitments limited, will be over. It is in Russia's interest to see that



Russian-made anti-tank missiles and mortars sent by Iran to the Palestinian Authority but seized en route by the Israeli Navy

land route develop since it will so clearly signal Washington's eclipse, an end to the brief hope, entertained ardently in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Amman, and Jerusalem, that President Trump would clip the clerical regime's wings in the Levant and Iraq.

And if Israel and Hezbollah go at it again in Lebanon—and Tehran hasn't been stockpiling tens of thousands of short-range missiles in Lebanon and building there increasingly sophisticated missile factories underground just to deter Israel from striking its cherished progeny—Moscow's position remains solid. Putin has no death-wish for Israel. In a country of fairly serious anti-Semites, the former KGB officer, who bought his former German-language instructor, a Russian Jew, an apartment in Tel Aviv, almost seems enlightened. But a bloodied Israel, an Israel forced into another Lebanon war, can only enhance Russia's position in the region. All parties—Sunni Arabs, Hezbollah, Iran, and Washington—will seek Russian intercession if the Israelis decide to launch a ground campaign to clean out the missiles. Although the Iranians are well aware of the demands that they have placed on Hezbollah in Syria, and probably will remain reluctant

SVEN NACKSTRAND / AFP / GETTY

to unleash a rocket war against the Jewish state until the Syrian conflict allows for a smaller Lebanese contribution, Tehran may give Hezbollah the green light to change the dynamic among Sunni Arabs. For Tehran, it's always good to put the Gulf Arabs in a position of de facto supporting Israel—and in the next war Jerusalem will surely hit Lebanon even harder than it did in 2006. Or, alternatively, to oblige the Saudis and Emiratis to flip publicly and support the detested Lebanese Shia. Killing and provoking Israelis is the go-to choice for the Islamic Republic, as it touches all the raw nerves of the modern Sunni Arab identity. It inevitably puts the Americans into a pickle, too, since Washington has repeatedly shown it doesn't have the stomach for protracted slugfests between Israel and Hezbollah given the unavoidable collateral damage.

It's neither surprising nor suggestive of something malevolent that the Trump administration has been so dimwitted in its appreciation of Russian objectives: Every American administration since the end of the Cold War has tried to approach Moscow nonideologically, as if the fall of communism had wiped out Russia's centuries-in-the-making animosity for the West. Still, George W. Bush's, Obama's, and now Trump's hopefulness with regard to Putin is disconcerting since even a cursory review of the man's actions and speeches since he assumed power in 1999 ought to forewarn American statesmen about "shared interests." For every sincere criticism that Putin has made about the bloody excesses of Soviet ideology, he has laid down a barrage against the West's defining culture of individualism and free speech, which he ultimately boils down to an invitation to sexual libertinism ("degradation and primitivism"). Trump has made light of the assassinations and political imprisonments that have punctuated Putin's rule, as if any democratically elected Western leader has engaged in such vicious lawlessness; Putin's actions are, however, similar to the actions of those who have dominated Iranian politics since the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989: Khamenei, the late clerical major domo Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and his right-hand man, Hassan Rouhani, who became president in 2013. A long list of tortured, jailed, and murdered Iranians can be traced back to the machinations of these three clerics. Trump's moral indifference to Putin is similar to the Obama administration's indulgence of Rouhani and his silver-tongued cohort Zarif.

It's difficult to see how the Russian-Iranian relationship ruptures. Even if the Iranians were to abandon the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear deal, which seems highly unlikely since the accord gives the clerical regime in under 15 years an industrial-size uranium enrichment capacity, the Russians have little to fear from an Iranian nuke. Their strategic position is reinforced while those of

America and the Sunni Gulf Arabs, who've hitched their national security to the United States, are weakened. The Europeans, who have, in theory, considerable leverage over the Russians through trade and investment, are not going to punish Moscow more for its Iranian alliance than they have already for its seizure of Crimea and its continuing war in Ukraine. The Europeans want to increase trade with the Islamic Republic, and as Total's recent billion-dollar agreement with Tehran to develop the South Pars gas field shows, the Europeans are becoming less fearful of the possibility the Trump administration may reinvigorate non-nuclear sanctions against trade with the clerical regime.

The Europeans have winced over the humanitarian catastrophe in Syria. Not that long ago, Paris loudly put the blame on Assad and privately spoke about wanting to do more, even some kind of Franco-American military check on the worst depredations by Assad and the Iranian-led militias. Not anymore. Sometimes pictures speak louder than words: The shot of a smiling President Emmanuel Macron welcoming an ebullient foreign minister Zarif probably signals the end of the anti-Assad period of French and European Union foreign policy. The victory of the Russia-Iran-Assad axis in Aleppo last December was decisive, and the Europeans expect further victories. As long as these triumphs don't lead to new waves of Arab Muslim refugees to Europe (and for the time being, Turkey and noticeably hardening European attitudes toward refugees have stemmed the flow), the Europeans are surely willing to accept—even welcome—Russo-Iranian domination in the northern Middle East. In a year, the Russians and the Iranians have gone from butchers and sowers of sectarian strife to potential forces for stability.

Which leaves the United States the odd man out. In 2009, President Obama wanted to test the proposition that the world would be better if the United States did less. That contention has certainly proven false for Iraqis, who saw their world go to hell after the American withdrawal in 2011. We will never know what could have happened in Syria if the United States and Europe had been prepared to intervene militarily against Assad before his Alawite/Iranian killing machine ramped up and Sunni society fell apart. Hundreds of thousands of lives might have been saved; the Islamic State, still Iraqi and in its badly battered, disorganized infancy, might never have taken off. If the United States had stayed in Iraq, the Islamic State would not have been born.

Trump doesn't seem to believe that the world is better off if Washington intervenes less; he just believes America is safer and richer when doing less, especially in the Middle East. The practical effect of the difference between idealistic, left-wing "globalism" and American First retrenchment is negligible (Trump responded militarily to Assad's use of

chemical weapons while Obama chickened out; Assad's barrel-bombing of women and children, which has slaughtered vastly more than the chemical attacks, provoked neither man to act). American foreign policy in the Middle East is still defined by a consensus that Trump and Obama agreed on by 2016: The United States can't do much with Middle Eastern Muslims, who are too culturally and politically handicapped.

Hence the bipartisan appeal of counterterrorism: It is the easier route to take when confronting the Middle East's manifold problems. Drone attacks and small special-forces/CIA paramilitary operations are practicable and can be repeated endlessly in a region where the core problems appear so intractable. American counterterrorism has become, more often than not, a liability for policymakers trying to work through the big issues that revolve around the regional heavyweights (Russia, Iran, Turkey, Israel) or deeply troubled but still-functioning states (Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia). Counterterrorism is *the* option for those who ardently oppose American hegemony and intervention but want to kill a few of those who want to kill us. It has become camouflage for our retreat from the Middle East.

The Trump administration may now be caught in a Russian-Iranian pincer movement. The fall of Raqqa, slow, bloody, and inevitable, will leave the United States in an untenable situation. Without a desire to stay in Syria, the White House will create a vacuum to be filled by Iranian-directed ground forces or other radical Sunni groups. The Kurdish wing of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the People's Protection Units or YPG, who've received the bulk of America's anti-Islamic State military support, aren't going south into Sunni Arab Syria. They will not become our paladins. They are happily engaged in commerce with Assad's Syria; they welcomed Russian emissaries. The YPG is essentially the southern branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, better known as the PKK, the half-baked Marxist guerrilla-cum-terrorist organization that has warred with the Turkish military for decades. Tens of thousands of Turks and Kurds have died in this conflict. The Turkish-Kurdish *modus vivendi*—the integration of millions of Kurds into Turkish urban society from Adana to Istanbul has largely been a success story—is far from rock solid.

As Washington has increased its cooperation with the YPG, Recep Tayyip Erdogan has become more solicitous of Tehran and Moscow, a reversal of his earlier hostility. His tilt makes sense: They are now winning in Syria and they can hurt him if they decide to do actively what Washington has done by default—aid and abet Kurds who hate Turks. America's strengthening of the YPG hasn't given Washington a trump card to play in post-Raqqa Syria; it may have given one to both Moscow and Tehran. What

the Obama and Trump administrations have effectively done in Syria and Iraq is down the Islamic State while empowering Iran and its militias. American airpower has de facto become the air wing of the Revolutionary Guards, clearing the battlefield for the Assad regime and its allies to take territory with less effort. General H.R. McMaster, Secretary James Mattis, and their able assistants undoubtedly would find this description somewhat offensive, but unless American manpower significantly increases in Syria and the target shifts from Sunni radicals to the Assad regime and its allies, Washington at best is engaged in a holding game. As in Afghanistan, that result isn't without value (it's better than outright losing), but it won't prevent an Iranian-Russian victory unless the United States is willing eventually to up the ante. Successful containment, let alone rollback, and acute risk aversion are incompatible.

No one in the White House or the Pentagon yet appears willing to contemplate scenarios in which the United States puts itself intentionally

on a collision course with Iranian/Iranian-directed combat forces or Russian Spetsnaz and aircraft. This gives the Russians and Iranians an insuperable operational advantage since if regime forces engage in any region in Syria where American special forces are not currently operating, they effectively claim that area as a no-go zone for American tactical assistance. Without American air and on-the-ground support, Sunni Arab Syrian forces can't take on the better-armed Assad axis. They would likely get slaughtered if they maneuvered as a group.

President Trump has about six months to reverse course and lay out a path to roll back the Islamic Republic in Syria and Iraq or see those two lands become permanent



Zarif and Macron in Paris

Sometimes pictures speak louder than words: The shot of a smiling President Emmanuel Macron welcoming an ebullient foreign minister Zarif probably signals the end of the anti-Assad period of French and European Union foreign policy.

satrapies of an expanding Shiite empire. So far, the Pentagon has shown no desire to do so, preferring in fact to flash a green light to Damascus, Moscow, and Tehran indicating it won't stand in the way of any regime effort to reconquer all of western Syria. In Iraq, the situation may be even worse. The Pentagon lives in fear of Iranian-directed Shiite militias turning on U.S. forces that have been advancing the demolition of the Islamic State. When U.S. military analysts ruminate openly about Moktada al-Sadr, the murderous Iraqi Shia firebrand who has often sought to intimidate his traditional clerical superiors in the holy city of Najaf and waged a nasty war against the United States, as a helpful thorn to Iranian plans to dominate Iraq, we know the Pentagon is only contemplating contingencies in which the American footprint remains small. Although the president's rhetoric on Iran has been the polar opposite of his predecessor's, Trump's actions on the ground have not significantly differed from Obama's.

END GAME IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Some on the American right, certainly many on the American left, may hope that a victorious Iran will somehow quiet the region, that it will do what empires traditionally do after the natives have been squelched: bring order and economic growth. The clerical regime may be bad, these folks will concede, but it isn't awful, like the radical Sunnis. Iran hasn't successfully launched a terrorist attack against the United States since 1996—if you ignore the hundreds of U.S. soldiers that Iranian-trained and -directed militias killed in Iraq. Sustaining and directing Hezbollah and sending Revolutionary Guard assassination teams after Israelis don't really count since these folks put Israelis into a different category than Americans and Europeans.

Iran's extraordinary contradictions—a generally pro-American population versus a fiercely anti-American ruling class—and an ancient and layered culture, which makes Iranians complex, curious, and appealing, also redounds to the favor of those who claim “shared interests” between the Islamic Republic and the United States. And, as always, Iran's internal politics provide hope that Thermidor is coming. The clerical regime's fractiousness inevitably gets interpreted by Western optimists, or those just weary of the Iranian-American clash, as a struggle of “moderates versus hardliners.” The triumph of “moderates,” now synonymous with the clerical and lay circles revolving around Rouhani, is, we are often told, in America's

best interests. That Rouhani and the American-educated Zarif have been ardent supporters of the war in Syria and Iran's intrusion in Iraq and Yemen is either downplayed or viewed hopefully (perhaps Iranian “moderates” will gain the high ground abroad, too).

But the Islamic Republic isn't trying to stabilize the Arab Near East; it's explicitly trying to disrupt it. The great crackup of the Arab Sunni state system—the search for political and religious legitimacy among the tyrannies, which has fueled the rise of Islamic radicalism, including holy-warrior movements like al Qaeda and the Islamic State, as well as the Great Arab Revolt, which started in Tunisia in 2010—has been a blessing for Tehran. The Islamic Republic's profound internal problems—the widespread antipathy for a corrupt, impoverishing theocracy

and the continuing rise of democratic sentiments among the large middle-class and college-educated—have not yet terminally cracked the regime's foundations. The pro-democracy Green Movement in 2009 almost did. But the regime recovered, and the nuclear deal, advanced by Rouhani and supported by Khamenei, Revolutionary Guards commander Mohammad Ali Jafari, and the dark prince of the security establishment, Qassem Suleimani, the commander of the guards' expeditionary Quds Force, has brought

billions in hard currency into the state treasury and offered the hope of billions more in foreign investment.

And money fuels ambition. The regime's adventures, once downplayed if not denied at home, have become open and proud. The propaganda is varied and unrelenting: Shiite Iran versus the jihadist-supporting Sunni Arab states; Shiite Iran versus America, the protector of the jihadist-supporting Arab Sunni states; Shiite Iran against the Sunni jihadists; and Shiite Iran, the savior of Arab Shiites. These nationalist and Shiite themes play better than the regime's older, more ecumenical propaganda that was usually just Marxist tropes with an Islamic patina. The Islamic Republic's foreign campaigns are now part of its play for domestic legitimacy. Iranian dissidents have a harder time criticizing the regime for its “pro-Shiite” wars when Arab Sunnis have been for so long so cruel to their sect. Political dysfunction at home—the regime's elite (hardliners, moderates, and everyone in between) are implacably at odds with the Iranian people's 100-year-old quest for popular sovereignty—will likely fuel more foreign aggression. Legitimacy denied at home will be found abroad.

Counterterrorism is the option for those who ardently oppose American hegemony and intervention but want to kill a few of those who want to kill us. It has become camouflage for our retreat from the Middle East.

All of this brings us back to how President Trump views the Islamic Republic's nuclear program. He ardently dislikes the nuclear deal. Is that because he finds its serious defects detrimental to America's national security? Or because it's an international agreement sanctified only by the United Nations Security Council? Or just because his predecessor negotiated it? Does he see it as a vehicle enabling baleful Iranian imperialism? Trump certainly doesn't share Obama's aspiration to recast the Middle East, with a downsizing America trying to embrace and normalize an Islamic Republic through commerce while a temporary nuclear agreement gives Washington, Jerusalem, and Riyadh time to adjust. Trump does, like Obama, see the region as a sand trap, where profits rarely exceed losses. This view reinforces the Russian-Iranian entente. The president has more or less said that if the Russians are willing to engage militarily in the region, and the Russians are more like "us" than "them," then better they go than us. That view probably has significant support in the U.S. electorate. Long gone is the American self-confidence that briefly resurfaced with the "surge" in Iraq.

It's possible, however, that the president's opposition to the nuclear deal could unravel his noninterventionist temperament, leading to pushback against both Iranians and Russians. The agreement is the hinge on which his predecessor built America's retreat. The cleverer minds among American noninterventionists know that, which is why they, too, want to maintain the accord and search for "shared interests" among Washington, Tehran, and Moscow. If the accord falls, however, then something else, possibly a much tougher approach, will fill the void. It's difficult to sketch the possibilities of American policy since the primary player, the president, isn't bedeviled by his inconsistencies.

If in October the president recertifies that the Iranian regime is sufficiently in compliance with the atomic accord to receive sanctions relief, it's unlikely Trump will ever break ranks with his generals who are fearful of abandoning the JCPOA. And one can sympathize with General McMaster and Secretary Mattis, who might be willing to do far more against the clerical regime, including abandoning the nuclear deal, if they thought the White House would staunchly back a long-term, more muscular approach, which would inevitably require the United States, however tepidly, to engage in "nation-building" in Syria and Iraq.

Judgment day is coming. What are Trump and congressional Republicans prepared to do to deny the Islamic Republic all pathways to nuclear weapons? Obama and congressional Democrats punted that gut-wrencher, novelly including within the deal its own planned obso-



The 2009 Green Movement in Tehran—a rare moment of hope

lescence and verification procedures that make U.N. nuclear inspectors laugh in private. Do Trump and the Republicans want to be, as critics will surely describe them, "reckless" and "warmongering" in an effort to prevent what most liberals in their hearts have already accepted—Revolutionary Guards armed with nukes? Do they want to punish and checkmate Russia's expansion in the Middle East? How they handle these questions could well determine American foreign policy globally for the next generation. ♦



An enamel plaque (circa 1530) housed in the Louvre, depicting Venus and Juno allying to unite Aeneas and Dido in love

Lost and Founder

Rage and remembrance in a new translation of Virgil's Aeneid.

BY SUSAN KRISTOL

The publication of a new translation of the *Aeneid* by poet David Ferry at the age of 93 is an outstanding achievement. Having also translated Virgil's other masterpieces, the *Eclogues* and *Georgics*, Ferry has spent two decades in the company of this great Roman poet.

One of the most influential works in Western civilization, the *Aeneid* is modeled on, and pays homage to, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Aeneas, the hero after whom Virgil's poem is named, is a secondary character in the *Iliad*. As the child of a Trojan father and the goddess Venus, he is on the losing side of the war. Through Virgil's artistry, Aeneas gets a spinoff—becoming the star of his own saga.

Prophecy has revealed to Aeneas that his destiny is to found a new city in Italy. As the epic begins, Aeneas and his storm-tossed group of Trojan refugees land in Northern Africa, where they are welcomed by Dido, the queen of Carthage. The goddesses Juno and Venus conspire to make the pair fall in love. Although Aeneas is content to help build Carthage, he obeys Jupiter's command to set sail for Italy. The devastated queen commits suicide and curses Aeneas—foreshadowing the enmity between Carthage and Rome. Aeneas finally arrives on the coast of

The Aeneid
by Virgil
translated by David Ferry
Chicago, 432 pp., \$35

Italy, where he must descend to the underworld to learn what is fated for the future of Rome.

The second half of the *Aeneid* is the "Iliadic" section, concerned with the battles that Aeneas fights to establish a foothold in Italy. His chief foe and rival for the hand of the princess Lavinia is the fiery warrior Turnus. In the final encounter between the two warriors, Aeneas gains the upper hand. Despite Turnus' pleas, he refuses to spare him, taking revenge for the killing of Aeneas' young protégé, Pallas:

and Turnus's bones
Went chilled and slack, and his life,
with a groaning shudder,
Indignant fled away to the shades
below.

The poem concludes here. This shocking and abrupt ending has led to much debate about whether the poem was complete when Virgil died and, more importantly, what Virgil intended us to think about his hero and the empire his descendants were to found.

One tends to imagine Virgil (70–19 B.C.) as an Augustan poet—a toga-clad aesthete declaiming poetry



Susan Kristol has a doctorate in classical philology.

before an admiring imperial audience. But the bulk of his life took place during the tremendous national upheaval marking the end of the Roman Republic. This was an era of shifting alliances, conspiracies, demagogic rhetoric, agricultural evictions, military battles, and murders. Only after Antony and Cleopatra were defeated by Octavian (later to be named Augustus) at the battle of Actium did a period of relative tranquility under one-man rule begin. No one could have foreseen that this new form of government would last for centuries.

Writing about the founding of a new political order and the national characteristics and personal sacrifice that made this possible, Virgil creates a new type of hero. Aeneas' first appearance in the epic occurs during a storm at sea, his limbs "weak and chill to the bone." His first words are a lament that he did not die a heroic death in Troy. Virgil thus asserts from the start his own artistic rivalry with Homer. His hero is no Achilles who dies a glorious death in battle, no Odysseus whose quest is to return home. Instead, Virgil emphasizes his hero's filial respect, piety, endurance, and selflessness as well as his courage. These virtues will equip him to build an empire—but they will not necessarily make him happy. (Nor, alas, will these virtues endear him to most modern readers.)

In place of the troubled past, the gods promise a glorious and peaceful Roman future—a welcome image for Virgil's audience after years of civil strife:

Then wars will come to an end and
savage ways
Be pacified and civilized under the
law, . . .
And in a cage impious Fury will sit
On a pile of broken useless weapons,
hands bound
Behind his back by a hundred knots
of brass,
And roaring hoarsely from his
bloody mouth.

The political nature of Virgil's epic distinguishes it from those of his Greek and Latin predecessors. Virgil is in part writing a response to his older contemporary Lucretius, whose *On the*

Nature of Things elucidates the teachings of the Greek philosopher Epicurus. There are two main responses to life's challenges—to embrace and confront them or to distance oneself from the fray. The Epicurean mode is withdrawal. Viewing a storm-tossed ship from afar is pleasant, as Lucretius writes, because "to perceive from what ills you are free yourself is pleasant." When contemplating death, according to Lucretius, one should be comforted by the thought that humans are just atoms that will dissipate.

By introducing his hero in the throes of a (perhaps Lucretian) storm at sea and by leading him to the underworld to speak with the shades of the

Winston Churchill famously described the essence of Latin: "The sentence fits together like a piece of polished machinery. Every phrase can be tensely charged with meaning."

dead, Virgil directly confronts Lucretius. At Dido's banquet in Book One, her bard sings a Lucretian-style song about the cosmos. Aeneas, in turn, tells the tale of the fall of Troy. In place of withdrawal or abstract scientific contemplation, Virgil's epic engages with the world of history and politics.

Aeneas is not yet a Roman at the beginning of the poem. When he becomes Dido's lover, his jealous rival alludes to his Asian origins with these unflattering words (note the alliteration, which appears in the Latin and is reproduced by Ferry):

This Paris with his perfumed hair
and his Phrygian
Bonnet tied with a ribbon under his
chin,
And his sissy band of eunuchs.

This taunt reflects the complicated view that the Romans of Virgil's time held of the civilized, wealthy lands to their east. They craved sophistication and luxury and the benefits of international commerce while professing a desire to return to an imagined frugality of an earlier, simpler Italy. (Sound familiar?)

In the course of the epic, Aeneas will be figuratively reborn—but not, perhaps, for the better. He descends to Hades, bearing the golden bough, past the rivers Styx and Lethe, Charon the "dreadful boatman," and Cerberus the three-headed dog, past the realms of punishment and the Elysian fields—he gets "the full underworld experience," as a professor friend likes to say. Finally, the shade of Aeneas' dead father shows him a procession of "all those who are going to be / Your Roman people." Aeneas' attachment to his Trojan past and lost loves will be replaced by a dogged resolve to look ahead. But at what personal cost? And why, when the hero departs from Hades, is he escorted through the ivory gate, "through which false dreams go up from the world below"? Is Rome in some way a false dream?

Winston Churchill famously described the essential nature of the Latin language: "The sentence fits together like a piece of polished machinery. Every phrase can be tensely charged with meaning." A challenge faces every translator of the *Aeneid*, to balance accuracy and art while maintaining Virgil's muscular energy. Ferry discussed his approach in a 2011 interview with the Poetry Foundation:

Every talk about translation that I've ever given has had the title "Not Getting It Right," and of course that's always true. . . . But any translation is a poem of its own and should be judged as such. It is the work of a poet writing lines. Anyone who translates must discover this.

Ferry's diction is mostly colloquial and conversational. He writes in a quiet, measured voice that is easy to read, line after line, mixing high and low. This technique may also be seen

in his own poetry. A good example is the beginning of his haunting poem “The White Skunk”:

That glorious morning late in
August when
The rosy-fingered dawn had scattered shadows
Away from the dreams I had dreamed the night before,
I looked out the back door of my condo . . .

At times Ferry’s colloquialisms may be grating. In Book Eleven of the *Aeneid*, for instance, an Etruscan king berates his men as follows: “you so-called soldiers, / You no-good, hang-back, half-ass Etruscans,” whose only care is “what the menu is tonight.” This may not be to everyone’s taste. But the opposite approach can seem overly Shakespearean: Robert Fitzgerald uses the word “poltroons” in translating this passage.

Ferry’s book lacks some standard features, such as a glossary of names, that could help a reader understand the epic. And unlike most modern translations, this edition gives no indication of the standard line numbering of the original text. For example, Dido stabs herself at line 937 of Book Four in this edition. A reader would have no way of knowing that this corresponds to line 664 in the original. Looking up a well-known passage, comparing other translations, or finding the Latin passage that is being translated are thus unnecessarily difficult.

In a work of this length, a critic may find many places to quibble over a missed metaphor or nuance. Less understandable are the places in which Ferry takes excessive license with the text. At the culmination of Aeneas’ visit to Hades, the shade of his father describes the Romans’ unique mission, one of the epic’s best-known passages. Here is Ferry’s rendering:

And Romans, never forget that this will be
Your appointed task: to use your arts to be
The governor of the world, to bring to it peace,

Serenely maintained with order and with justice,
To spare the defeated and to bring an end
To war by vanquishing the proud.

Tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento. Robert Fagles translates this line faithfully: “rule with all your power / the peoples of the earth.” By contrast, Ferry’s less powerful “be the governor of the world” sounds like he is describing a plum post at the United Nations. The words “Serenely maintained with order and with justice” and “to bring an end to war” are his own additions, which likewise make the

just another kind of human “work” and the insight that Virgil’s “pitying” voice is unified across his three great works of poetry are rather different from the usual interpretations of the epic.

Ferry elaborates on this point in a beautiful commentary on a passage in Book Eleven, a section that he sees as emblematic of the entire poem. It is the start of a day of funeral pyres for fallen warriors. Dawn with her “pitying light” brings back the suffering of “sad mortality,” a phrase Ferry tells us he has borrowed from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 65. “Relentless toil and sufferings,” Ferry writes, “are definitive of the condition of being mortal.”



Dido is inconsolable upon Aeneas’ departure.
(Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, Death of Dido, circa 1760s)

Romans’ reign sound more appealing. Finally, the Latin has “You [singular], Roman [singular], remember [singular].” One feels the finger of Aeneas’ father jabbing at his chest. Why does Ferry change this to the plural “Romans”? Why change “remember” to “never forget”?

Ferry writes in the preface about his love of Virgil, “his voice as I hear it in all these poems, telling how it is with all created beings, the very leaves on the trees, the very rooted plants . . . the soldiers doing their work of killing and dying, the falling cities, and the kings and fathers, and their sons. . . . Virgil’s voice telling it as it is, in his truth-telling pitying voice.” The claim that war is

Is the pervasive, inevitable suffering of humanity the chief message of the poem? One’s initial reaction is to disagree. The *Aeneid*, after all, is about the founding of a specific people, the Romans, who did succeed in ruling much of their world for centuries.

But Ferry’s interpretation cannot be entirely dismissed. Darkness hovers over the epic. Book One, for instance, presents the harmonious scene of the building of Carthage, which the poet compares to the work of bees in the field: “The community is glowing as it works; / The honey is fragrant with the scent of thyme.” The reader, while enjoying the simile, knows full well that the ultimate fate of Carthage is to be utterly destroyed by Rome.

Aeneas, the ultimate “winner” of the story, pays a price for the mission he must fulfill. The refugee who was pleased to help build Dido’s civilized city becomes a savage warrior who orders the sacrifice of captives over the funeral pyre of Pallas. The Trojan hero who began the epic beseeching heaven, with quaking limbs, is seen at the end as a man consumed with wrath, destroying the quaking limbs of his defeated foe. We never actually see the hero founding a city or marrying his promised Italian bride. The poem that began with the “savage implacable rage” of the goddess Juno ends with the “terrible savage rage” of the man Aeneas.

“Never forget,” says the shade of Aeneas’ father. Memory can be destructive, as in the goddess Juno’s refusal to forget old slights to her honor. But memory is also the way we preserve ancient wisdom and honor heroes from the past. As Aeneas says in his farewell message to his son, thinking he may be about to die: “Learn, my son, from me, / What courage, and the true labor of courage, is. . . . Remember what I have said to you.”

Remembering the past and taking an interest in the suffering of others are marks of a civilized culture. Thus when Aeneas sees his own history, the fall of Troy, depicted on the walls of a Carthaginian temple, he is grateful to have arrived at a city that displays respect and compassion for others’ trials. He expresses his amazement in 7 words, a sentence that is one of the most famous in the epic (expanded to 27 words in Ferry’s rather prolix version)—*Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*:

These are the tears of things for what
they were,
And what has become of them; the
story of
The mortality of men strikes to the
heart.

Several years ago, in an article entitled “Do the Classics Have a Future?” the British classicist Mary Beard talked about “a due sense of wonderment” that so many books survive from clas-

sical antiquity, offering “the possibility of a most wondrous shared voyage of exploration.” The importance of the classics, she goes on to say, is not just in the impressiveness of the books themselves but also in the conversations they allow us to have across the centuries with other important thinkers. Virgil conversing with Homer, Hesiod, and Lucretius; Augustine, Dante, and Milton conversing with Virgil—it’s hard to think of any conversations

more worth trying to eavesdrop on.

Once we cut this cultural chain or refuse to regard it with the wonder it should inspire, we are left adrift without guides from the past, in a self-important, self-defining world. Inventing meaning for ourselves, acting as though no one had ever suffered dislocation or loss or defeat or triumph in the past—that would be a lonely world, one in which I hope we won’t choose to live. ♦



Camo Criminals

*Army Ranger Alex Blum went rogue.
His cousin wanted answers.* BY STEFAN BECK

Every schoolboy ought to know—but probably doesn’t—the famous couplet from Rudyard Kipling’s “Tommy”: “Yes, makin’ mock o’ uniforms that guard you while you sleep / Is cheaper than them uniforms, an’ they’re starvation cheap.” George Orwell, though he held that Kipling did not “understand the economic aspect of the relationship between the highbrow and the blimp,” nevertheless endorsed Kipling’s sentiment. He sneered at those “left-wing parties in the highly industrialised countries” who “make it their business to fight against something which they do not really wish to destroy. . . . [Kipling] sees clearly that men can only be highly civilised while other men, inevitably less civilised, are there to guard and feed them.”

Perhaps every schoolboy *does* know the “wolf, sheep, and sheepdogs” speech from 2014’s *American Sniper* or at least its memorably obscene cognate, a decade earlier, in *Team America: World Police*. We are divided into the strong and the weak. The strong are subdivided into predators and protec-

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Ranger Games

*A Story of Soldiers, Family and
an Inexplicable Crime*
by Ben Blum
Doubleday, 412 pp., \$28.95

tors. The training of men with violent and thrill-seeking natures into “sheepdogs” is a necessary condition of our fragile order. Ben Blum’s *Ranger Games* takes up this essential fact and asks: How honest are we willing to be about those “inevitably less civilized” men on whom the enterprise of civilization will, like it or not, inevitably depend?

This question was thrust upon Blum in an unlikely, even cinematic, fashion. In 2006, his cousin Alex Blum, then on the cusp of realizing his dream of serving with the elite Army Rangers, participated in an audacious armed bank robbery in Tacoma, Washington. Then again, to call it “audacious” may be to reach for an ennobling cliché. What it really was was senseless and poorly executed. Though planned in some particulars as meticulously as the bin Laden raid, it failed on what can hardly be counted as a detail: Nobody bothered to obscure the license plate



Security-camera images of the 2006 heist

on the silver Audi that Alex, the getaway driver, had borrowed from his dad.

Ranger Games explores the discomfiting realities, and occasionally enormities, that the ennobling clichés conceal. The all-American Blum family, with its back-slapping jocks and starry-eyed patriots, was just such a cliché: perfect on the surface but ill-equipped to cultivate one of its most promising members, the socially awkward yet talented mathematician Ben Blum. “He had grown up with a brilliant mind in mainly philistine surroundings, and some streak in him that may have been partly neurotic led him to prefer the active man to the sensitive man”: That is Orwell on Kipling again, but it applies equally well to Ben Blum, who could have cocooned himself in intellection but chose to wonder how a certain kind of reckless, adrenaline-drunk masculinity really works.

First Ben had to wonder something simpler: Why would Alex do it? Why would he dynamite his future with the Rangers to commit a crime that, even were it not utterly counter to his family and military values, he was almost certain not to get away with?

Several sensational theories are advanced over the book’s 400-plus pages, all turning on the fact that the robbery was masterminded—if that is the right word—by Alex’s most trusted and admired military superior, Luke Elliott Sommer. One is that Alex was so brainwashed by the Rangers’ sadistically grueling selection process—ominously called RIP, for Ranger Indoctrination Program—that he was incapable of making his own decisions.

(RIP has since been renamed, less ominously, RASP, or Ranger Assessment and Selection Program.) Another theory is that Alex believed the robbery to be staged, a training simulation to prepare him for unusual behind-enemy-lines combat scenarios. Still another is that Sommer was an alpha-male Svengali who manipulated his co-conspirators as easily as he might field strip an M4 carbine.

The first of these theories is the most substantial. Ben Blum depicts Ranger training as akin to something out of a Hieronymus Bosch painting. It is not only physically taxing, as one might expect, but also emotionally disorienting and debilitating. The practice of “smoking” recruits—doling out imaginative impromptu punishments—is often preceded by ordering them to break a rule in order to *have* something to punish. In this lose-lose environment, almost comically savage verbal abuse comes standard. The average civilian will recognize it only from, say, *Full Metal Jacket* or some of David Mamet’s scripts.

But Ben Blum hints at an uncomfortable possibility: What if this process is both dangerous to a soldier’s identity or sanity *and* entirely necessary? He describes in considerable detail the thought and research that have gone into developing our military’s training regimens. His digressions on works like S.L.A. Marshall’s *Men Against Fire* (1947) and Samuel A. Stouffer’s *The American Soldier* (1949) are illuminating. The reader is left to contend with his own relative ignorance, his “unknown unknowns,” and to ask: What if this is the least worst way to train fighting men, with trag-

edies like Alex Blum’s the unavoidable collateral damage? A modern military, like any highly specialized, technical organization, does things for a reason. As a character in *Zero Dark Thirty* says, moments before being vaporized, “Procedures only work if we follow them every time.”

To say the first theory is the most substantial is not, however, to say that it is altogether very substantial. Even an automaton must recognize an order as such before obeying it. At nowhere in its haphazard planning stages does the robbery carry even a whiff of official sanction. By that same token, the argument—inconsistently and tentatively offered by Alex Blum himself—that because training may involve realistic simulations, anything that happens at any time might be training, is a child’s logic, not a soldier’s. This leaves us with Luke Elliott Sommer as mind-control artist.

It is easy to see why these theories might appeal to Alex’s family or his defense attorney, to critics of military culture, or to some devotees of psychology and social science. It is hard to see, however, why anyone familiar with Occam’s razor should have much patience for them. The reader feels like a teacher told by the parents of his worst-behaved student that he is a “good kid,” as if goodness were some discrete thing, existing independent of one’s actions, like an organ, like a heart. Alex never broke a rule in his life, we are reassured. And yet the end to which Alex had put all of this discipline was not, you may recall, getting a job as a crossing guard. This fact seems relevant.

And so these theories, though irresistible fodder for a true-crime book, are only necessary if one accepts a set of naïve and sentimental premises. No, parents do not and cannot know their children completely. No, what someone does to get what he wants—in this case, to serve in a larger-than-life military unit—is not a reliable indicator of his character. No, Luke Elliott Sommer, profiled in painstaking and fascinating detail by Ben Blum, does not seem like a sophisticated and charismatic Hannibal Lecter type. He seems, to adapt a phrase, like a stupid person's idea of an evil genius, or maybe just an evil genius as imagined by a young man raised on bad movies and worse video games. His plans—inciting turf wars with the Hells Angels; starting a crime family—sound like the overheated

fantasies of an overgrown teenager.

So it is not much of a surprise, really, when Ben Blum finally learns that his cousin has been lying to everyone, perhaps including himself. It is a relief to watch him learn it—the hard way, after he has expended immeasurable time and effort trying to crack what turns out to be a simple case. Our armies rely for their power on youth, a measure of recklessness, a capacity for fantasy, an appetite for glory. This is a feature, not a bug. We have armies in part so that those elemental forces are channeled toward the common weal. *Ranger Games* is a moving look at one family's struggles with truth and forgiveness. Yet it is a hell of a lot more compelling as a reminder of what the world might look like if young men like Alex Blum had no coherent ideals to serve at all. ♦

which included Barbara Guest and James Schuyler in addition to O'Hara, Koch, and Ashbery—unable or simply unwilling to say much about it, foxing his way out of an answer. Guest died in 2006. On September 3, 2017, Ashbery joined her at the age of 90.

Ashbery, of course, had been foxing his whole life. Born in 1927, he was raised on a fruit farm in western New York near Lake Ontario. He disliked rural life, was uninterested in sports, and got along poorly with his father, who had a short temper. He spent much of his time reading books at his grandparents' house near Rochester, where his grandfather taught physics at the university. With the help of a neighbor who apparently recognized his promise, he attended Deerfield Academy and went on to study at Harvard, graduating *cum laude* in 1949.

It was at Harvard that Ashbery met O'Hara and Koch, who shared his interest in surrealism, atonality in music, and avant-garde theater. In 1952, he attended a performance of John Cage's *Music of Changes* and was inspired. "It was just arbitrary bangs on the piano over quite a long period of time," he told Michael H. Miller in the *Observer* in 2013. "I had been in a drought with my writing. I felt I hadn't written anything good in almost a year. It really gave me ideas about how to write poetry again."

But there was really only one idea: to use seemingly arbitrary fragments of varying diction to create poems that lacked any controlling image or narrative. Over 30 volumes of verse, several volumes of translations, and a handful of plays, Ashbery would single-mindedly explore the surface of language.

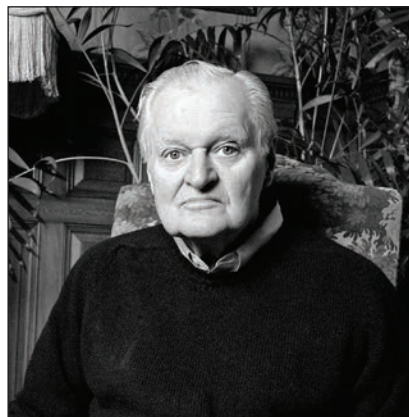
In 1954, W.H. Auden was unable to pick a winner for the Yale Series of Younger Poets; none of the manuscripts he reviewed that year seemed worthy of the prize. For the next year's competition, he picked Ashbery's poems—but apparently only begrudgingly. Some of the editors involved in the competition, who had eliminated Ashbery's submission, were outraged by the selection, and Auden wrote an ambivalent foreword

BCA

Cracks in Language

Remembering Pulitzer-winning poet John Ashbery, last of the New York school. BY MICAH MATTIX

When I met John Ashbery in 2005, he seemed to have difficulty remembering his time in 1950s New York with fellow poets Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch, which is what the roughly two dozen people in the university seminar room mostly wanted to talk about. They had read about those early days spent in artists' studios sipping martinis or at the Cedar Tavern arguing about poetry while Jackson Pollock got drunk. They had read the work, too—work that was announced as "the new American poetry" in Donald Allen's 1960 anthology by the same name and that, along with that of poets from San Francisco and Black Mountain, prom-



John Ashbery, RIP

ised freedom from old concerns about concision and coherence.

The era had the aura of myth, especially for precocious middle-class kids from Midwestern suburbs, and here was one of only two surviving members of the New York school of poets—

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EAMONN MCCABE / GETTY IMAGES

warning Ashbery of the “problem” of manufacturing “calculated oddities.” Other than a defensive review of *Some Trees* in *Poetry* in 1957 by Ashbery’s friend O’Hara, the response to the volume was universally negative. “I could make very little headway in understanding Mr. John Ashbery’s *Some Trees*,” wrote William Arrowsmith in the *Hudson Review*. “Apart from two or three poems . . . I have no idea most of the time what Mr. Ashbery is talking about . . . beyond the communication of an intolerable vagueness that looks as if it was meant for precision.” This judgment was typical.

But for Ashbery it was contemporary poetry that was odd and imprecise. He would go on to write poems that were even more disconnected. “My poetry,” he once remarked, “imitates or reproduces the way knowledge or awareness come to me, which is by fits and starts and by indirection. I don’t think poetry arranged in neat patterns would reflect that situation. My poetry is disjunct, but then so is life.”

He would move to Paris in 1955 and remain there for a decade, publishing *The Tennis Court Oath* in 1962 and *Rivers and Mountains* in 1966. His break would come with the publication in 1975 of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. It seems Ashbery had not changed, but literary tastes had: The book won all three of America’s most prestigious literary prizes—the Pulitzer, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. The volume, which takes its title from the painting by Parmigianino, shows Ashbery’s preoccupation with diction and syntax over meaning.

The disjunction of life could be, in Ashbery’s hands, corny, terrifying, or beautiful—or simply a fact that, like all facts, becomes more interesting and harder to pin down the longer one thinks about it. “All things are palpable, none are known,” he writes in “Poem in Three Parts”:

The day fries, with a fine conscience,
Shadows, ripples, underbrush, old
cars.

In later volumes, Ashbery would allow himself a little more fun. In “A

Held Thing,” for example, from *And the Stars Were Shining* (1994), he pokes a few good-humored holes in “poetic” diction and the preoccupation with clarity:

Then he sort of lobbed it
over the fence if you know what I
mean.

I do know what you mean
but I shall not tell anyone
about it until all your meaning
is clear to me, that is until it becomes
clarity
that sucks us out of the void and
across the orchard.

Yet our attempts to make sense of experience were never occasions for derision for Ashbery. William Logan writes that he transformed “insouciant nonsense into a charming anti-lit-

erary manner,” which may be putting it a little too lightly. Still, Ashbery nudges and prods, often including himself in the great—if also serious—joke of the cosmos. His eye for cracks in the surface of language and ear for the way diction and metaphor patch the surface were the result of a lifetime of practice.

Whether or not Ashbery’s work will “survive the severe judgment of time,” as his early champion Harold Bloom predicted it would, is unclear. The longing to tell stories and make sense of life (and death) may prove too powerful for even the most clever and productive poet to overcome, as those questions from university students 12 years ago, and now many obituaries of Ashbery himself, show. ♦



Fantasia on a Theme

Ordinary delusions and the madness of crowds in Kurt Andersen’s unreal America. BY JAMES BOWMAN

Kurt Andersen may be right in supposing that what looks like Americans’ increasing inability to distinguish fantasy from reality is the big topic of our times, and there are at least 2 or 3 of his 46 chapters in *Fantasyland* in which he does justice to his subject. His rapid *tour d’horizon* on New Age spirituality, homeopathic medicine, pseudoscience and the paranormal, the psychiatric vogue for “recovered memory syndrome,” and the legal craze in the 1980s and early ’90s for prosecutions of imaginary, “Satanist”-inspired child abuse is a valuable compendium, particularly for young people who didn’t live through the period when such things were taken seriously. Above all, we should be glad of his documentation of how those false-belief

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Fantasyland
*How America Went Haywire:
A 500-Year History*
by Kurt Andersen
Random House, 465 pp., \$30

fads—and other species of hokum, such as the anti-vaccine hysteria of the early 2000s—were treated with seriousness by the media about whose traditional role as gatekeepers to “reality” he is otherwise so solicitous.

Andersen is also sound on some other sorts of crazy and socially harmful fantasies that are still very much with us, such as conspiracy theories, pornography, the infantilization of pop culture, celebrity culture, reality TV, violent video games, legalized gambling, and the boom in plastic surgery. Yet he casts his net so wide that, along with these things, he pulls up Civil War reenactors and war-gamers who are a different kind of

thing altogether. Imaginative re-creation of a known reality for the sake of knowing it better is surely something to be distinguished from the fanciful invention of non-realities that are then treated as real. You could even argue that cosmetic surgery is not qualitatively different from cosmetics, which have been around (along with condemnations of them) forever.

It would be an interesting argument to have, anyway. But Andersen—a novelist and the host of the public-radio show *Studio 360*—is not much interested in the hard work of argument, since he is not really writing for anyone who doesn't already agree with him. He is obviously not interested in selling his thesis, for example, to the “huge national audience” to which, as he asserts without bothering to demonstrate, Rush Limbaugh daily brings “a sociopolitical alternate reality.”

It is one thing to say that you disagree with somebody, but Andersen's way of saying he disagrees with you, like that of so many other polemicists nowadays, is to tell you that you are living in an “alternate reality.” No evidence, argument, or persuasion is required.

In the book's subtitle, which is *How America Went Haywire: A 500-Year History*, the word “America” does not really denote the country lying between Canada and Mexico. Nor is “America” the country of which Kurt Andersen himself is a citizen. No, the country that allegedly started going “haywire” 500 years ago, even before it was a country, is itself a fantasyland, a simulacrum of the real America but comprising only an admittedly large population of suckers and the marginally cleverer con men and women who have preyed on them for centuries and are still preying on them. Andersen may describe himself as an American, but he writes about America as if he and the class of enlightened sophisticates to which he



belongs stand outside it, laughing at the monkeyshines of those credulous Americans he purports to describe.

It is a familiar posture, pioneered a century ago by H.L. Mencken and since adopted by the academic left with such unanimity as to be almost a requirement for admission to the number of those who belong, or aspire to belong, to our ruling elites—as they occasionally let slip when, like Peter Jennings in 1994, they describe the electorate as being a 2-year-old having a temper tantrum or, like Barack Obama in 2008, as clinging “to guns or religion or antipathy toward people who aren't like them.” Hillary Clinton may have apologized for saying “half of Trump supporters” could be put in a “basket of deplorables,” but no one can have doubted that it was what she really thought of them. It's what the whole class to which she belongs thinks of them, as their support for Trump, if nothing else, shows they very well know.

It is also the class to which Andersen belongs, as he acknowledges when

he quotes Obama on the bitter clingers and comments: “Sure, it was condescending, but it was also true.” His book amounts to little more than an elite attempt to justify its author's perception of the America for which he harbors such contempt. Remarkably, for a book that's all about the blurred lines between reality and fantasy, it never troubles to define what “reality” is. Why? Apparently because it never occurred to Andersen to doubt his readers will be as sure as he is that they already know what reality is and that it must be coterminous with the progressive narrative of the last 50 years, culminating in the enthronement of that ultimate fantasist, Donald Trump.

The delightful discovery with which Andersen hopes to entertain readers is that the predominantly right-wing (as he sees it) and American addiction to the merely

fantastical actually goes back 10 times as far—in fact to the very beginnings of the European settlement of the continent. In effect, he has started with Trump and worked backward—until he suddenly found that it's been Trump and Trumpism (or as good as) all along. His start date of 1517 appears to have been chosen in honor of Martin Luther's launching the Protestant Reformation in that year. To Andersen, “the disagreements dividing Protestants from Catholics were about the internal consistency of the magical rules within their common fantasy scheme.”

In his view, Luther's real revolution was the invention of a kind of “DIY Christianity” that a century later issued in the “nutty religious cult” that settled Massachusetts and so paved the way for such natural successors three or four centuries later as Billy Sunday, Billy Graham, Pat Robertson, the Pentecostal movement, Jim Jones of the People's Temple and cyanide-laced Kool-Aid fame, and, of course, Donald Trump. The rhetorical

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temptation must have been very great here, but even Mencken might have balked at the historical obtuseness of finding no important difference between 17th-century English Puritans in Massachusetts and such latter-day successors as these. On more than one occasion Andersen even implies that Americans and their forebears are comparable to Islamist terrorists.

To a man with a hammer, they say, everything looks like a nail, and Andersen's hammer is *fantasy*, whether of God or of gold, of show-business or suburbia. Writing history backward by analyzing a contemporary phenomenon like the Disneyfication of culture ("the fantasy-industrial complex") and then projecting it onto the past can be done only by not making elementary distinctions, especially between religion as a historical phenomenon and the fantasy-mania we are observing today, which has also affected religion.

As it has everything else, very much including Andersen's sort of historiography, which seeks to translate historical phenomena into contemporary pop-cultural terms with which they can have had nothing to do. To him there are no difficulties, no mysteries in the past, just stuff that we've all seen already on TV and that the superior among us have always laughed at. Thus, Joseph Smith's Mormonism—and perhaps Christianity itself—is described as biblical "fan fiction." "*We'll give Jehovah a son,*" he writes of the authors of the New Testament, "*part god and part human!*" Yeah, that must be how it happened: just like a Hollywood superhero pitch session. Elsewhere, trying to be witty, he writes of the biblical account of Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness as the time when "Satan tried to make Jesus prove he had superpowers and come to the dark side."

Talk about fantasy! Talk about (as he also does) anti-intellectualism! Yet Andersen has no fear of not being taken seriously by an audience that presumably eats such stuff up. Likewise, he has no fear of contradiction in gratuitously treating as fantasies things like "gun rights hysteria,"

"free-market fundamentalism," or the ideas (unspecified) of the "hysterical true believers" who made up the Tea Party—things that are fantastical only by virtue of belonging to the politically disfavored. Andersen apparently thinks that climate change "denialism" is equally the fantasy of those who regard it as a "hoax" and those who merely dissent from the economically ruinous left-wing consensus as to what to do about it.

Andersen leaves out certain fantasies of the left that might prove inconvenient to his thesis. He has much to say, for instance, about right-wing "McCarthyism" back in the 1950s, but next to nothing about the biggest fantasy of the 20th century, that of Marxist communism, which, though not American in origin, once enjoyed a considerable vogue in this country, especially among the privileged classes, and is now enjoying a resurgence among the academic left. Andersen is all over cosmetic surgery but has not a word to say about the much more drastic (and arguably much more fantastical) idea of sex-reassignment surgery that has lately become all the rage among progressives and in the media.

In the fantasyland environment of today, it is ill-advised to make fantasy a partisan subject, the property of one political party almost to the exclusion of the other. If Andersen is right in thinking that it is primarily Republicans who have gone off the deep end for fantasy, then he cannot also be right in thinking that it is the salient feature of our *whole* culture today, including our political culture, let alone something that has been present in American culture since the beginning. He ends up suggesting that only the things (or political parties) he likes are immune to the fantasy bug—or, when you get right down to it, that only he himself is. In other words, he might as well be calling himself, as Rush Limbaugh does himself, the "mayor of Real-ville."

Andersen periodically makes little self-deprecatory gestures, such as admitting that he once played a video game often enough to get good at it and that, in writing about what he sees as

the middle-class fantasy of the SUV and the pickup (it goes with the Frank Lloyd Wright fantasy of the suburbs), he owns a Land Rover. But the only fleeting moment of real self-awareness comes a few pages from the end of the book, where he writes: "Mix the Protestant impulse to find the magical meaning and purpose in *everything* with the Enlightenment's empiricism, and you get our American mania for connecting all the dots, irrationality in rationalist drag"—and then he footnotes the bit about "connecting all the dots" thus: "I realize: given this book, I'm one to talk."

And yet this momentary flash of insight doesn't translate into any overall awareness that he himself and the book he has written are at least as much a part of the fantasy culture he describes as those benighted religious nuts and gun nuts and free-market nuts. To claim, as Andersen does, that our country is a "fantasyland" is an obvious mistake, since in order to be able to identify it as such, you would also have to be able to identify reality as such, and that is just what we cannot do in a world in which reality has come to mean whatever we want it to mean. In other words, Andersen is just as much in thrall to *his* vision of reality as any of the alleged fantasists he attacks, and calling it "rationalist" no more validates his certainty than their calling theirs God-given validates theirs.

Since Andersen never gets around to it, let me attempt to define "reality." Reality is what any two debaters or controversialists have in common—or, to put it in another way, reality is what is, if anything is, uncontroversial. Since there is very little if anything in our public discourse today that is uncontroversial, it follows that there is little or no reality anymore. Andersen does not know this, though knowing it would seem to be the minimum requirement for writing a book like *Fantasyland*. That makes *Fantasyland* itself a fantasy, though an all-too-familiar one. It is the fantasy of the intellectual that of all the rival systems competing for our attention his alone is reality-based. ♦

“On Inauguration Day, in one of his final acts as president, Barack Obama left a letter to Donald Trump, welcoming him to the White House and offering him advice in an office that lacks ‘a clear blueprint for success.’”

—Washington Post, September 4, 2017

PARODY



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

January 20, 2025

Hey—

Wow, has it been a wild 8 years. So wild, so wild, let me tell you. It wasn't easy becoming the greatest, most popular president ever, though I had a huge large base of support from the very beginning. That's how I ended up with the largest inauguration crowds in history. More than Obama, trust me.

But now you're president. You got some big shoes to fill. And big gloves, for that matter. So let me give you some advice, a little something I call "The 5 Fingers of Federal Success"—a course I will be teaching when I relaunch Trump University this spring. Seriously, it's great. When I teach, I've got this big board made with all the 5 fingers on it like a hand. Very good board, made on a laser printer. A friend of mine who is one of the biggest guys in boards, huge board guy, told me it's the most impressive board he ever saw.

Usually, I charge \$699 up front (a tremendous deal), but for a fellow president, I'll just bill you. You're welcome.

Finger 1: Don't listen to what anyone else says, ever—they didn't win! ~~I~~ You did!

Finger 2: Keep your promises—that's why everyone loves me. Also, I'm just a very likable person.

Finger 3: Hire family—they're the only ones you can trust, because you control their inheritance.

Finger 4: Screw Congress—everyone hates those guys. Why are they even there? I still don't know.

Finger 5: Wash your hands frequently—especially if you just met with some foreigners.

Some people will say, "You can't do it! You're not a Washington insider!" SAD! Just because you're a former professional wrestler doesn't mean you can't be a great president. Probably not "Trump Great." But maybe "Nixon Great." Anyway, I'm looking forward to finding out what The Rock is cooking up for America! And I'll always be here if you need more advice. At a very fair price.

You're Double Welcome,

DJT