A SYMPOSIUM ON
THE OBAMA
PRESIDENCY

How to Think About the Welfare State

Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem

Who are the Progressives?

Snow Days and Election Days

Reviews of Irving Kristol, Pope Benedict XVI, True Grit, and More
We at Counterpoint seek to publish thoughts which reveal the principles and practices of American politics, policymaking, religion, and society. We are conservative in the sense that we find wisdom in the time-tested, vigor in enduring morality, and greatness in the ordered liberty of the American polity.

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Counterpoint is printed by In-Print Graphics.

Publication of Counterpoint is made possible by Student Government, the Collegiate Network, and private donation.

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Contents

Letters to the Editor  2
Incidents on 57th Street  8

The Wikileaks Hypocrisy by Kevin Jiang
How Wikileaks Betrays the Conservative Ideals Behind its Namesake  10

How to Think About the Welfare State by Ajay Ravichandran
Advice for Conservatives  12

Understanding the Progressives by Josh Lerner
And the Transformation of American Politics  18

Hannah Arendt and the Challenge of Jewish Sovereignty by Yiftach Ofek
Why Arendt is Celebrated in Post-Zionist Circles  23

The Feminine Mistake by Lauren Butler Bergier
How We Changed our Bodies to Fit the Market  30

A Symposium: The First Two Years of the Obama Presidency
START by Michael Talent  33
Health Care by Jeremy Rozansky  34
Abortion/Stem Cells by Tom Palmer  36
Civil Rights by Josh Lerner  38
Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell by Taylor Brogan  40
Free Trade by Alastair Cleve  40
Transparency by Ben Silver  42
The Middle East by Yiftach Ofek  43

Reviews

Darkness at Noon by Martin Salvucci
A review of Light of the World by Benedict XVI and Peter Seewald  45

Three Cheers by Jeremy Rozansky
A review of The Neoconservative Persuasion by Irving Kristol  47

A Delightful Subtlety by Michael Talent
A review of “True Grit”  49

No One Knows About Totalitarianism by Yiftach Ofek
A review of “No One Knows about Persian Cats”  51
Affirmative Action

To the Editor:

From the author’s overly reductionistic opening analogy—likening college admissions to a timed footrace—stems a grossly misguided argument. The goal of most college admissions is not to select the “100 fastest runners”; it is to create a diverse community of accomplished individuals that functions as a team. While what determines the winner of a footrace is easily quantifiable (running time), what determines a winning basketball team for instance, is not. Each player’s unique abilities contribute to the team’s overall success. Colleges want to foster successful communities that will later contribute to a successful society. If they wanted a group of successful multiple-choice-test takers, then they would surely save themselves a great deal of time and money in selecting an incoming class by simply ranking students according to their SAT scores. Fortunately, they do not because they know that many qualities are not as easily quantifiable as a multiple choice test score. How could a standardized test possibly quantify such qualities as inquisitiveness, integrity, and creativity? The author seems to have forgotten the holistic aspect of college admissions. While he argues that race is a superficial kind of diversity, I would not only argue that the SAT is a superficial measure of intelligence, but that race is far from a superficial kind of diversity. Being born of a certain race profoundly influences the way in which one views and experiences the world. Racial diversity also entails the cultural and socio-economic diversity that is invaluable in academic discourse. The end of affirmative action in favor of strictly quantifiable measures of achievement would mean the end of our vibrant college communities. While those who do not benefit from the current admissions system might view it as unfair, it is in line with the functioning of the strong multicultural and innovative society of which we are a part.

- Kali Frampton

Cory Liu responds:

I am not calling for an end to holistic admissions entirely, but rather, to simply end preferential treatment based on race. While diversity of viewpoints and experiences can be beneficial to a community, race-based affirmative action is not the way to accomplish it.

The purpose of my initial analogy was not to argue that college admissions should be reduced to a numbers game. I focused on SAT scores in the beginning only because it provides a concrete, statistical illustration of the effects of affirmative action. I agree with you that college admissions should remain a holistic process.

An applicant’s academic promise cannot be determined through the numbers alone, and the admission process should not be reduced to solely quantifiable measures like SAT performance. Extracurricular activities and work history, for example, are important to consider as well.

However, race is entirely different from these factors because it has nothing to do with the applicant’s potential as a student.

A winning basketball team certainly requires players with a variety of abilities – some players will be small and fast, others will be large and slow. But a player’s race has nothing to do with his ability to play the game. Likewise, race is different from other holistic factors in college admissions because it has nothing to do with the applicant’s talents or abilities. Competing on a high school basketball team or Mock Trial team requires discipline and dedication. But race is determined at birth, and is something that we have no control over. The analogy of the runners is not about judging people only on their numbers, but judging them on their abilities in general.

Now of course, universities are not competitive sports teams. As you point out, in addition to picking the most academically promising students, they should also seek to build a diverse community with a variety of life experiences. I agree with this point as well, but race-based affirmative action is not the right way to achieve this goal. While racial diversity can be related to socio-economic diversity and diversity of viewpoints, it does not entail them as you suggest. Within each racial group are wealthy families and poor families, liberals and conservatives, atheists and theists, extroverts and introverts, and every other possible belief and personality type.

In addition, there are many types of diversity that are missed by race-based affirmative action. Certainly an African-American from an inner-city...
neighborhood brings a unique set of life experiences. But doesn’t a child from an impoverished family that emigrated from Vietnam after the Vietnam War bring a unique set of experiences as well? Both applicants have been through great hardships on the path to academic success, but one would receive preferential treatment simply because his race as a whole tends to present less competitive applications. Race-based affirmative action overlooks the various other types of diversity that students can contribute. It is a crude and ineffective method for creating a truly diverse student body.

**Same-Sex Marriage**

To the Editor:

Carl Roberts’ argument in “Social Science’s Case for Traditional Marriage” (Autumn 2010) is a far cry from his stated objective of providing a rational argument against same-sex marriage. First, he says, heterosexual, procreative marriages accrue unique societal benefits that same-sex marriages cannot duplicate; and second, same-sex marriage might disincentivize marriage in the same areas of society, so we shouldn’t risk fiddling with so ancient, sacred, and unchanging an institution. Before addressing these arguments, I’ll reproduce what the editors wrote several months ago when describing Counterpoint’s purpose: “far from acting as a talking points repository, Counterpoint will provide students with critical, scholarly analysis of the great and timeless issues facing our nation” (emphasis mine).

In response to common claims of a parade of horribles following the legalization of same-sex marriage, Laura Langbein and Mark Yost examined and compared relevant data for states where same-sex marriage was legal and illegal, and concluded that “laws permitting same-sex marriage or civil unions have no adverse effect on marriage, divorce, and abortion rates, the percent of children born out of wedlock, or the percent of households with children under 18 headed by women.” Surely “critical, scholarly analysis” of the same-sex marriage issue would include an explanation of competing evidence, so I find it surprising that C.R. makes no attempt to rebut or even to reference studies whose conclusions disagree with his own. It is particularly surprising since Judge Vaughn Walker cited Langbein and Yost’s study among his findings of fact.

C.R. later says that heterosexual marriage “is a fundamental building block of all societies, one whose absence or weakness causes great social dislocation and disorder.” The Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) released a statement in 2004 declaring that “[t]he results of more than a century of anthropological research ...provide no support whatsoever for the view that either civilization or viable social orders depend upon marriage as an exclusively heterosexual institution.” Again, it’s legitimately surprising that C.R. didn’t consider the opinion of the AAA when Judge Walker cited this exact source in support of Finding of Fact 55, the one that C.R. chose to set his entire 7,000-word argument against. Even supposing that C.R. did not read all of Judge Walker’s opinion, and he is thus unaware of the work of scholars like Langbein and Yost, the premise that heterosexual marriage is the only way marriage has worked since time immemorial needs some legitimate foundation. C.R. is of course permitted to argue that the Executive Board of the AAA practices shoddy anthropology, but he should then provide some contradictory findings and put the two into conversation, because that is how critical, scholarly analysis is done. To do otherwise is just a charade.

Then there are the inexplicable claims C.R. makes about procreation: e.g., that “there are no cases in which it is possible for same-sex [couples to procreate].” The American Psychological Association’s (APA) briefing on sexual orientation notes that according to the “2000 U.S. Census, 33% of female same-sex couple households and 22% of male same-sex couple households” have at least one minor child. C.R. may object that heterosexual couples are innately more fit to raise children. In opposition to such a claim, the APA concludes that “the research indicates that the children of lesbian and gay parents do not differ markedly from the children of heterosexual parents in their development, adjustment, or overall well-being.” Why C.R. didn’t provide any social scientific studies to directly refute the APA’s broad conclusion is, again, a mystery; if, on the other hand, C.R. concedes that there are no different outcomes for children of gay and straight parents, then procreative fitness is no longer a valid rationale against equal marriage rights, if it ever were. There is other evidence, too: James Pawelski et al. find that “[c]hildren who are raised by civilly married parents benefit from the legal status granted to their parents”—so there are benefits to the children of same-sex couples by giving their parents’ relationship legal recognition—and they emphasize that “[t]here is ample evidence to show that children raised by same-gender parents fare as well as those raised by heterosexual parents.” Ellen Perrin et al. conclude the same, namely that gays make the same quality parents as heterosexuals, and that “[n]o data have pointed to any risk to children as a result of growing up in a family with 1 or more gay parents.” Mike Allen and Nancy Burrell performed a meta-analysis of available studies of children of gay parents, and concluded that “[w]hether the data are measured from the perspective of the parent,
“Even supposing that C.R. did not read all of Judge Walker’s opinion, and he is thus unaware of the work of scholars like Langbein and Yost, the premise that heterosexual marriage is the only way marriage has worked since time immemorial needs some legitimate foundation.”

teacher, or child, no difference exists between heterosexual parents and homosexual parents.”

C.R.’s own citations are disingenuous. Accompanying one citation, he claims that “[m]arried couples [i.e. heterosexual couples] seem to build more wealth on average than singles or cohabiting couples”, but fails to explain why this finding is limited to heterosexual couples. He merely takes it for granted that the economic benefits of marriage must follow from the different sexes of the partners. Neither theory nor empirical evidence supports this conclusion. And even if gay couples make less money, on average, than straight couples, it is irrelevant unless (1) gay couples would choose to enter straight unions in the absence of marriage equality or (2) same-sex marriage disincentivizes straight marriage. Likewise for C.R.’s citation to a study arguing that high rates of marriage leads to better schools, lower crime rates, etc.: there is simply no evidence to suppose that these benefits uniquely accrue to heterosexual marriage, and there is no theoretical reason to suppose it’s true while waiting for empirical evidence.

The same critiques apply to the Institute for American Values’ (IAV) conclusions, which C.R. characterizes as being about “traditional [i.e., heterosexual] marriage”, though I doubt whether the IAV endorses that interpretation. The founder and president of the IAV, David Blankenhorn, was reportedly unsurprised by new polling data showing that “[a] majority of Americans now say their definition of family includes same-sex couples with children, as well as married gay and lesbian couples”, since he subscribes to what he calls “the standard definition of family: two or more persons related by blood, marriage or adoption . . . ” As I said, the same critique from above applies to the IAV’s findings about the benefits of marriage: there’s no reason to suppose these are benefits of heterosexual marriage alone. It may be the case that outcomes of children of two parents are better than those raised by a single parents, but since we’re only talking about same-sex marriages—and not single-parent gay households—comparisons of two-parent households and single-parent households are in general beside the point. To repeat, the evidence about children’s outcomes rejects C.R.’s claim; the sex of a child’s two parents does not affect her own outcomes.

C.R.’s second argument, an appeal to the supposedly analogous effects of welfare payment changes, is, as far as I can tell, either irrelevant or actually supports the expansion of marriage rights. There is no evidence to suggest that expanding marriage to same-sex couples will effect decision-making by anyone other than potential gay married couples, let alone that it will effect in particular the decision-making of the poorest Americans. The analogy to welfare policy changes is inappropriate since in that case, C.R. describes financial motivations for staying single. Although I don’t know enough about public policy schemes to judge whether or not that is an accurate description, it seems valid to suppose that the poorest are most likely to be successfully incentivized by a marginal income increase. Letting gay people marry, however, does not disincentivize straight marriage in this way. C.R.’s claim is better read in response to the views of some libertarians who want the government to get out of the “marriage business” and therefore remove the tax benefits that married couples receive, which may diminish the incentive for some couples to marry, under C.R.’s logic. However, proponents of the expansion of gay marriage support more couples’ being eligible for these financial benefits, so I would expect C.R. to support the expansion of the marriage institution, in order to especially incentivize poor gays and lesbians to marry.

The most surprising claim C.R. makes is that “the social mores of the homosexual community . . . are simply not as conducive to producing highly functional monogamous relationships.” For obvious reasons, appealing to gay men’s allegedly inferior social mores is not an appeal to social science, and should be no part of serious scholarship. Further, unless there is a link between monogamy and successful marriage other than folk notion that married couples only have sex with one another, such a point is irrelevant. (Of course, just like heterosexuals, not all gays want to be married; a statistic about the average gay man’s reported sexual behavior doesn’t reveal whether the gays interested in marriage are the ones less likely to be monogamous. It’s therefore improper to presume that the gays who want to get married are the supposedly promiscuous and morally inferior ones.)

In large part, C.R.’s argument is bunk because he doesn’t take account of the great deal of empirical evidence contradicting his claims. In particular, evidence that
allowing same-sex marriage does not disincentivize marriage among other sectors of society, and evidence that children of same-sex parents fare as well as other children. Counterpoint thus ought to correct C.R.’s piece or stop pretending that their authors provide critical, scholarly analysis. Charles Lipson, who wrote a piece for Counterpoint and whose book, Doing Honest Work in College, is given to every undergraduate, advises that “[w]hatever your subject, it violates basic research ethics to leave out unfavorable results.”

Andrew Thornton

Carl Roberts responds:

First of all, I’m glad my piece has garnered such a strong response. At one level, the goal of all intellectual labor is the promotion of a discourse and I realize that any piece dealing with as controversial a topic as mine did was always going to engender something of a confrontational response. That being said, I’m sorry to say, Mr. Thornton does not address my central claims about same-sex marriage and instead seems much more intent in arguing against points he imagines I make, and dismissing evidence of mine that doesn’t accord to his neat and tidy worldview.

The first point in response I’d like to make is more of a general one. Mr. Thornton, in his response, wishes to paint my position as being one dominated by at least an implicit prejudice against gays. Whatever the merits and demerits of my argument may be, I will proudly say that I make it without any intention of offense and with the utmost care to avoid the appearance of prejudice. I do not argue that gays are deficient people, that homosexuality is intrinsically sinful or wicked, nor do I argue that gays cannot be good parents. My argument boils down to this: same sex marriage, in expanding the definition of marriage beyond simple procreative bounds, makes the general social importance of traditional marriage of less obvious social benefit, and in doing so, provides those marginal actors possibly seeking marriage less of an incentive to marry. In the long run, it will further increase the rates of the single-never married, amongst whom are our poorest citizens.

This was why I began by citing the benefits of traditional marriage: not to argue that same-sex marriages will bring with it the downfall of civilization, or to say even that the benefits of marriage could not possibly transfer too same-sex couples, but rather that we know (as much as we can know any sort of social facts) that decreasing marriage rates will significantly harm society. If we hold this to be true, then anything that decreases the rate of traditional marriage is something to be avoided.

But even beyond this, there are serious problems with the evidence Mr. Thornton marshals to disprove this phantom claim of mine. The Langbein and Yost study of the differential effects of same-sex marriage on social statistics of the three states that legally recognize same sex marriage that Mr. Thornton and Judge Walker eagerly cite does not have the power to make nearly the assertion that its proponents claim. Not to get bogged down in the details, but suffice it to say the sample size and the lack of controls for the racial and social make-up of the states they examine (Vermont, Massachusetts and very briefly Iowa) makes the predictive power of their study somewhat dubious.

Furthermore, the differentials they do point to cover such a small period of time, particularly in relationship to the vast scope of social policy change, that it is hard to ascribe to this study any long-term validity. Marriage in the United States began to decline only at the end of the 1960s, yet much of what is often attributed to this decline—the rise of working women, the increased ubiquity of birth control, etc—all predated this collapse by over a decade. Frankly, the purview of any single state is not enough to properly measure the impacts of given social policy: if, as I do, one argues that the problems brought on by same-sex marriage are largely cultural rather than political or economic, then it is rather hard to imagine that any state exists as an autonomous culture unaffected by (and unaffected) any other state. The Langbein and Yost study, although certainly an important contribution to the discourse, is a rather incomplete reference.

The same cannot be said for the two professional organizations Mr. Thornton cites in support of his argument. The American Anthropologists Association (AAA), in arguing that the family is not a crucial social consideration for the advancement of civilization, interestingly enough, does not really act as if there are characteristics that make up a successful civilization. The AAA, I should remind you, has dropped the word “scientific” from its mission statement because it no longer believes that the scientific approach to knowledge is as valuable as the more relativistic one. They have “conceded” that most of what we understand socially is, in reality, impossible to actually understand. Which makes these sorts of “factual” observations they make seem all the more doubtful; if the only truths they can actually ascribe any meaning to are some sort of politically correct, universalistic non-judgmentalism, then pronouncements they make in favor of such propositions are simply not credible.

The American Psychological Association, another citation Mr. Thornton makes in order to justify dismissing my claims, is just as politically problematic as the AAA. Dr. Robert Perloff, past President of the APA, criticized the APA for
overstated their cases; Judith Stacey and Timothy Biblarz’s 2001 study of same-sex adoption studies, appearing in the American Sociological Review, showed that many of the same-sex adoption studies were vastly overstating their claims to show no differences between couples raised by two men, two women, and a man and a woman.

This brings me to the next issue. Mr. Thornton brings up, namely my assertion that same-sex couples cannot procreate, is equally unfounded. Certainly, there is no physical reason same-sex couples cannot adopt children, nor is there any reason that one of the members of the partnership cannot be involved in a procreative act with someone of the opposite sex. But those two actions, for all of their merits and demerits, are not procreation. No matter how much Mr. Thornton would like to bend words, a procreative marriage would still have to entail two people having children with each other. There is a reason procreation qua procreation is very important to marriage, the basic understanding of marriage as a social institution was completely tied to establishing a stable and beneficial environment in which to raise children. There is ample evidence to suggest that there is a fundamental way in which one approaches their own child that is different than the way one would approach any other child; this holds true even in the best of adoptive families. It is simply disingenuous to assume that there is no difference between procreation and adoption.

And this is where, in Mr. Thornton’s response, he completely loses track of what I am arguing, and what the limits of observational studies are. The evidence I provide arguing for the positive social benefits of traditional marriage, the possible disincentivization of traditional marriage, and the social costs of such deterioration, is largely from long-term observational studies, and as such deal with only the reality as it is. In providing this evidence, the unit most often observed is that of the traditional marriage, partially because marriage itself is what is being studied, and partially because traditional marriage is the only unit they could study to determine these facts. More succinctly, studies determining the economic benefits of marriage, for example, would only be on heterosexual marriages, not same-sex marriages, because that is what is being studied. Mr. Thornton states at one point, “there is simply no evidence to suppose that these benefits uniquely accrue to heterosexual marriage,” which, in and of itself may be true, but is a rather meaningless statement. The evidence collected in these studies was of heterosexual couples, a particular fact that makes inferring from them the effects on same-sex couples a rather dangerous proposition. Mr. Thornton cannot simply assert that there is no reason to assume these benefits do not extend to same sex couples without asserting any reason to do so.

But for the most part, this discussion is irrelevant because throughout this part of his argument, Mr. Thornton is refuting a point I simply do not make. I never argue that same-sex marriages couldn’t benefit from the...
some of the same social conditions that benefit traditional marriage—for the purposes of my argument this is a largely irrelevant question. What I assert is that declining traditional marriage is an unambiguous social harm, and that the legal recognition of same-sex marriage will provide, in the long term, less social incentives for those seeking traditional marriage, generally damaging traditional marriage as a result. Unless he is willing to argue that the number of same-sex marriages in the long run will make up for the declining number of traditional marriages—an argument I would be much more willing to take up, for which I think the evidence is simply not there right now—his arguments about the possible social benefits of same-sex marriage are not relevant.

When, more than 3/4ths of the way through his letter Mr. Thornton gets to my incentivization argument—the core of my entire argument—he dismisses said assertion that same-sex marriage could radially disincentivize marriage by ignoring the social side of incentives and strictly looking at the monetary nature of incentivization. What he misses is that welfare policies, which admittedly started with monetary incentives that damaged marriage, eventually extended into the realm of social pressure: welfare was one of many things that changed the culture of marriage, greatly minimizing the social detriments of being a single-mother. That is why the depressed state of marriage continued after the worst of the welfare payment systems, the AFDC, ended in the 90s; the web of social incentives no longer pushing people towards marriage far outweighed the simple elimination of the financial incentives against marriage. Without the great social incentive towards marriage, the institution—no matter how well subsidized—simply withers. And, in line with the first part of my argument, this disincentivization of marriage is socially and politically disastrous.

Furthermore, when speaking to the particulars of culture and the changing of a social institution, it is not unwise to consider the social characteristics of those who are going to be newly involved in the social institution. Invoking differential social mores is a serious point in determining the likelihood of the institution of marriage being permanently altered by its expansion to include same-sex couples. Contrary to Mr. Thornton, who thinks discussing social mores “should be no part of serious scholarship” (tell that to Tocqueville), the question of the sexual habits of homosexuals does play a role in shaping the social stigma surrounding infidelity. Also, Mr. Thornton’s incredulity at the idea that there “is a link between monogamy and successful marriage” is rather remarkable. It is not simply a “folk notion” that monogamous marriages are more successful ones—read the Kinsey Institute study on sexual behavior (infidelity is the leading cause of divorce)—it is an anthropological fact that almost all marriages are monogamous. Consider what esteemed anthropologist G.P. Murdock said about monogamy and marriage; “An impartial observer employing the criterion of numerical preponderance, consequently, would be compelled to characterize nearly every known human society as monogamous.”

In addition, the evidence on non-monogamous relationships has been rather conclusive about their stability, or their lack-there-of. Morton Hunt, author of Sexual Behaviors of the 1970s, wrote that open relationships “have proven disruptive to the marriages of most of those who have practiced them, and too threatening to the majority of those who have not to be seriously tried out. Relatively few people, even today, manage to make permissive marriage work at all, let alone work better than exclusive marriage. …Extramarital sexual acts are severely threatening to the emotional identity and security that marriage seems to offer.” So, yes, increasing the social acceptability of non-monogamous marriages would, ultimately, weaken marriage; the fact that gays, particularly gay men, are far more inclined to be sexually promiscuous, even gay men in committed relationships (a 2010 study by Colleen Hoff from the Center for Research on Gender & Sexuality at San Francisco State University found that 47 percent of gay men in relationships were in open relationships, while only 45 percent were monogamous ones, compared with over 80 percent of heterosexual relationships), does support the claim that the changing culture associated with same-sex marriage could lead to the decline in marriage.

So in regards to Mr. Thornton’s adamant claims that my argument is “bunk”, he simply does not make his case. Mr. Thornton, not quite unlike Judge Walker, needs to reexamine his perspective on the social science of same-sex marriage. Granted, I wished I had the time and the space to address every counterclaim made against my argument in the original piece. Unfortunately, as my piece was already over 7500 words, I simply did not have the room to do so. I would like, one day, to go back and revisit my original piece and expand it quite substantially: information included in this response would be the tip of the iceberg as to the additional information included. But, with that being said, I stand by every claim made in my original article, and I think that the supplementary information provided in this response should more than satisfy my critics’ complaints. QP
Incidents on 57th Street

It is more common that the “The City that Works” doesn’t than the powers that be would like us to think. But nature has a way of humbling our best-laid plans. The city of Chicago, far too proud of its snow removal capabilities in past years, seemed rather helpless in the face of the roughly two feet of snowfall in early February, shutting down non-emergency transit for roughly twenty-four hours. As much as it always wishes it is, the University of Chicago was no exception. Indeed, the administration displayed a bizarre determination to keep classes open even in face of this storm. It wasn’t until almost 2 AM the day of the storm that the University finally decided to cancel classes, over 12 hours after Northwestern had made the same decision. Certainly, classes shouldn’t be canceled willy-nilly, but putting off this decision to the last minute holds the student body hostage. And even when the blizzard ceased, the University of Chicago did not immediately return to normal. Even over a week later, the buses, so crucial to innumerable students’ transportation, were reduced to one, infrequent line. Still, the rarer-than-a-blue-moon day—a University of Chicago snow-day, let alone two days—will be a standout memory of our four-years. Midterms can wait when there’s a snowball fight in front of Swift Hall with hundreds of your fellow Maroons.

“Our elite universities should not dissuade the best and brightest from defending this country across the globe. They should not further the segmentation of the civilian elite and our military. They should welcome those in the most honorable line of work to their campus, in part to demonstrate to the rest of their students what honor looks like.”

"It is time to leave behind the divisive battles of the past. It is time to move forward as one nation.” Such was how President Obama urged the numerous Universities without Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) to reinstate the program. For years, schools like Harvard and Columbia had refused to offer the program that allows students to receive scholarships in exchange for military service after graduation. The rationale evolved from the Vietnam War protests to a disapproval of the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy. With DADT soon to be fully repealed, these private universities have lost their excuse to bar military recruiters and ROTC. So President Obama, while giving unfortunate credence to their complaint, did the right thing in urging the end of ROTC and recruiter bans. Our elite universities should not dissuade the best and brightest from defending this country across the globe. They should not further the segmentation of the civilian elite and our military. They should welcome those in the most honorable line of work to their campus, in part to demonstrate to the rest of their students what honor looks like. These are among the reasons to reinstate ROTC at every campus where it does not exist, including the University of Chicago. To be fair, the U of C does not cite DADT as the cause for its lack of ROTC. Rather, lack of interest in 1936 sent ROTC away, and those interested can travel to IIT or UIC for the program. We should co-host a program with IIT or UIC so that our ROTC students are a presence on this campus as well. The University has a long tradition of service to the nation in a time of war, especially in research and development for the military. The United States, make no mistake, is at war; the University should remain in service.
With Richard M. Daley declaring an end, or perhaps just an interruption, to his mayoral dynasty, Chicago was overtaken by a swarm of candidates running for the Democratic Party’s nomination. With Republicans in elected office rarer than ketchup on a hot dog, the Democratic winner will be the certain successor to Mayor Daley. Three main candidates emerged: Former Senator Carol Moseley Braun, former Daley advisor Gery Chico, and Former White House Chief-of-Staff, Congressman, and dead fish shipper, Rahm Emanuel. And since this is Chicago, the ethnic politicking began. Candidates’ strategic attendance at ethnic restaurants, churches, parades, and other venues reminded us of William F. Buckley Jr.’s 1965 campaign for mayor of New York City. Refusing to attend the Pulaski Day Parade, the campaign wrote the following to a bureau of Polish citizens: “I hope you will understand his policy: it is to treat the voters of New York as responsible adult-individuals and not as members of monolithic voting blocs.”

Fun, as we are well aware at the University of Chicago, eventually dies. That’s what the Illinois political establishment is now learning. Illinois is in the most dire fiscal situation of any American state, and Chicago the most dire of any major city. Illinois is the first state to have a bankrupted public pension fund and, when it does, it will take a quarter of the gross state product just to make up the gap. Chicago has its own pension problems. It will also go bankrupt later this decade, at a cost of over $40,000 per household. Not only is the horizon dismal, but in the here-and-now Illinois has a record $13 billion dollar deficit. The choices have already begun, with the state slashing funding for programs for the disabled and raising the state income tax by 67%; yet the dent in the deficit is miniscule. Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels recently rejoiced at the prospect of employers leaving his poorly managed neighbor for his superlatively managed state, saying, “We already had an edge on Illinois in terms of the cost of doing business, and this is going to make it significantly wider.” Governor Pat Quinn and the next Mayor of Chicago will continue to be in an unenviable position. Emanuel, we should point out, is Hebrew for ‘God is with us.’ Let’s hope so.

One of the peculiarities of our lexicon is how the word “charity” is so frequently substituted with “social justice.” In the former, good deeds are done for the destitute because of a merciful heart and a compassionate soul. In the latter, the deeds are done out of an ideological commitment derived from a broader, oft-utopian, social and political vision. We are reminded of this discrepancy when, on January 22nd, the University Community Service Center (UCSC) hosted a “Social Justice and Activists Conference” entitled “Relationship, Strategy, Solidarity: Thinking Globally, Acting Locally.” The event featured a speech by the self-described Marxist author of A People’s History of the Third World and workshops led by SDS and Southsiders Organizing for Unity and Liberation. The UCSC should be helping to facilitate students’ local good works. By funding an event like this, the UCSC injects radical ideology as the basis for such student efforts. Not only is this the wrong basis, but it narrows the appeal of community service. Helping the community should have no implicit ideology.

Once upon a time, long before the idea or phrase “sensitivity training” was born, college students in a heterogeneous university had developed a strategy for getting along with one another. It was a strategy based on civility and prudence. Civility, prudence, tact, and the inevitable social repercussions of the lack of such traits keep our conversations as appropriate and constructive as they need to be. The University obviously doesn’t think so, as it has created the category of “bias incidents,” loosely defined as prejudiced behavior toward a variety of classes. Campus free speech is constrained, therefore, by the subjective implementation of these vague codes by the Bias Response Team. This is the subject of a recent report on The University of Chicago’s speech codes by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) that gave the U of C FIRE’s lowest grade. The Chicago Maroon defended these policies in an editorial as necessary to stop speech that “stifles productive discussion.” What constitutes productive discussion, is just as vague and subjective, just as the origin of the authority to make such pronouncements about what is and is not productive. Perhaps we can just avoid this Orwellian rigamarole and accept that life in a democracy implies a willingness to be offended.
Perhaps nothing defines world politics in the modern age better than the power and influence of the internet. There is no institution that better represents the internet's controversial strength than Julian Assange's Wikileaks. In the recent months, the media and various governments have come out with scathing critiques and stalwart defenses of Wikileaks and its mission. The goal of the present critique is not simply to add to the wide range of indictments of Wikileaks' impact on world politics or international relations. Instead, it aims to show that despite Assange's claim of a noble mission, the actions of Wikileaks represent a wholesale betrayal of the inherently conservative ideals of his staunchest followers.

Before delving too deeply into behavior of both Assange and Wikileaks, we must first take a brief aside to explore what exactly this following is. To the casual observer, the attitude of Wikileaks and its followers seems emblematic of a particular internet subculture, what I will refer to as the “wiki culture” (WC). The overwhelming attention that has been granted to Wikileaks and Assange has put the media’s spotlight surely on this sub-culture and it has, in turn, created the conception that Wikileaks’ philosophy and the WC philosophy are one and the same. So it may come as a surprise to many, both within this culture and outside of it, that Wikileaks represents just the opposite of the ideals that the WC claims to promote.

This culture is often associated with issues regarding free and openly available information, and is particularly linked to operations such as Wikipedia. As I alluded to above (and have detailed in a previous issue of Counterpoint) the WC is, despite its generally progressive rhetoric and population, an inherently conservative culture. At its core, the WC promotes a philosophy based on the ideal that the ingenuity, creativity, and knowledge of the individuals in the population can achieve far more than anything singular government or business can achieve. Take Wikileaks’ name’s inspiration, Wikipedia, as a simple example. Wikipedia was formed with belief in the knowledge base within the general populace as its guiding principle. By using the world as editors, rather than simply the small editorial staff of a typical encyclopedia, Wikipedia predicted that with such a volume of readers and editors, inaccuracies would be discovered and fixed more efficiently than if a single editorial team were to proofread articles one by one. Today, while Wikipedia is still certainly not fit for formal citation, it has become the go-to quick reference resource for almost anyone with an internet connection. Moreover, to achieve this with simply an entrepreneurial spark, a simple faith in the strength of individual citizenry, and no intervening government or special interest, is something distinctly conservative.

So then, with offshoots such as WikiAnswers, WikiQuote, and WikiBooks, not to mention smaller topical wikis on almost anything one could think of, the wiki culture is certainly one not to be underestimated. It would seem then, with a name like Wikileaks, Julian Assange’s website would quickly fall into the tradition of the WC. But aside from its stated goal of revealing government and business secrets to “the people,” Wikileaks operates contrary to the very basic tenets that make its namesake such an influential organization. In its current, and most notable, iteration, Wikileaks’ publication and content policy is not one of open contribution, but rather one where submitted leaks are subject to harsh control, and publications are timed simply to the needs of its owners. Unlike a true wiki, where knowledge is deemed necessary or unnecessary by the readers themselves, Wikileaks seems to work under the assumption that it, not the

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The Wikileaks Hypocrisy: Winter 2011
citizenry, knows what information is fit for publication and what information can be withheld to a later date. Wikileaks, despite its name, acts not as the voice of the people, but rather as the voice of its own interests, using “unpublished information” and “more leaks” as hostages in response to shutdown and legal threats. Interestingly then, that an organization that sits on its high horse and chastises world governments for withholding information from its citizens would use the same tactic to further its own goals. Stand this in contrast to organizations such as Wikipedia, which have also come under fire from many influential intellectuals and leaders for its open content policy. For Wikipedia, the solution is simple: remove offending content if it is clearly inaccurate, and stand by its principles if the content is accurate but “inconvenient,” a far cry from aggressive responses taken by Wikileaks.

Indeed, it is difficult to say how Wikileaks is in any way better than the mainstream media outlets it criticizes, and for the organization to compare itself to the news reporting capability of the wiki culture generally is simply preposterous. When it comes to news, the wiki culture stretches far beyond the obvious outlet WikiNews; the culture is pervasive in online constructs such as Slashdot or Digg, where again freedom of information reigns supreme. The WC’s approach to news is very simple: editors don’t dictate when news is reported or how news is interpreted—the news and its readers determine that. In a community such as Slashdot or Digg, news is constantly updated, commented, and analyzed by any person who wishes to make his ideas known. While this can occasionally lead to some seriously unwholesome and uneducated discussions, the ideal behind the madness is one of libertarianism and freedom. Wikileaks, on the other hand, focuses more on making the news than reporting it. It is no surprise then that threats of “new leaks” almost always come just as Wikileaks’s previous headliner story is about to rotate out of the popular news cycle. By making its readers wait for information, even though it is readily available to print, Wikileaks’ board reveals its paternalistic and egotistic attitudes. Wikileaks’ behavior betrays the fundamental conservative tenet that people deserve to make their own decisions about the information they receive, interestingly doing so despite their stated goal of making government information accessible to the world population.

In the wiki culture, there is a single ideal that stands above all the rest: openness to criticism. Whether it is Wikipedia, Slashdot, or one of the many other website that embody the wiki culture, there is always room for disagreement, criticism, and debate, except within Wikileaks. For a company that makes it its mission to expose the inner workings of governments, Wikileaks is interestingly insular when it comes to its own operations. Officially, Wikileaks remains secretive to protect its supports from the attacks of the governments it aims to embarrass. Yet, the following that Wikileaks has achieved is not simply composed of uneducated dolts; in fact many of its larger supporters, given their considerable online presence, are more than capable of dealing with cyber-sabotage. Rather, Wikileaks’ secretiveness is more because transparency would mean criticism of its techniques, debate over its methods, and most importantly, showing its followers just how little faith Wikileaks has in their intellect and abilities as individuals.

The wiki culture is one of individual ingenuity and freedom of information, two ideals that many a staunch conservative can sympathize with. With the rise of Wikileaks, there is the risk that the promising conservatism of this culture will be destroyed by those who see Wikileaks as the future of the wiki system. This is not to say that the overarching ideal of more accountable, transparent government proposed by Wikileaks is necessarily reprehensible. Indeed, conservatives in particular should consistently look for ways to make governments more accountable to the citizens they serve. The wiki culture itself already provides modern conservatives with the tools, networks, and freedom to call for reforms, such as elections and districting transparency, which directly affect the citizens’ ability to hold governments accountable. However, they must strive for such goals in ways that promote the strength and contribution of each citizen, and not through methods that promote the culture of paranoia, elitism, and egotism that Wikileaks represents.

In Wikileaks, supporters believe that they have found a paragon representing the strength of individuals and citizens over the tyranny of great world powers. What they have really found, however, is an overbearing organization masquerading as the voice of the people, an institution no better, if not one worse, than the opaque, manipulative government that conservatives resist and Wikileaks claims to combat. ☐
The impressive Republican victory in last November’s elections has been taken by many conservatives as evidence that their movement’s basic approach to politics is reasonably sound, if not spectacularly effective. Closer examination of two related aspects of that election, however, makes clear that the favorable position the party now enjoys masks serious problems facing both it and the conservative movement more generally.

The agenda that the Republicans ran on was almost entirely negative: they promised to roll back President Obama’s expansions of the federal government, but offered few substantial policy proposals of their own. This approach is not sustainable: people may vote for a party once or twice just because they hate the other side more, but they are unlikely to take it seriously over time if it does not offer a compelling affirmative vision.

It seems plausible to locate the origin of this problem in another striking feature of the campaign—the prominent role that the orthodox small-government wing of American conservatism, as represented by the Tea Party movement, played in crafting the Republican message. For advocates of a minimal state which does little more than protect life and property, any effort to use government power to address problems like skyrocketing health care costs or mass unemployment is necessarily illegitimate. While this strand of conservatism has recently taken on an especially central role in shaping the Republicans’ agenda, it has exerted substantial influence within the conservative movement for decades and has long been used to argue for the unqualified rejection of the welfare state. Regardless of this position’s merit as an abstraction, however, it is simply not viable as a basis for a political party’s platform: no party can hope to be competitive in a modern democratic-capitalist society if its agenda makes no room for the social welfare programs whose creation and administration most people see as an important function of government.

Many conservatives have noticed this problem and tried to address it, but they have made relatively little progress in part because they have failed to consider a vital question: what would a distinctively conservative welfare state look like? This issue matters because, just as conservatism cannot survive if it is entirely unresponsive to the needs most citizens expect their government to meet, it cannot govern without an principled informed vision of some kind for at least two reasons. First, if conservatives abandon blanket opposition to the welfare state and put no position concerning the proper use of government power in its place, citizens will have no reason to prefer them to American liberals—people choosing between parties with essentially the same policies are likely to prefer the one whose support for those policies is robust and genuine to the one which advocates them out of political necessity alone. Second, conservatives who believe that the only principled response to the welfare state is to dismantle it will have no standards with which to guide their use of state power once they realize that this response is politically unrealistic.

Therefore, conservatives must articulate a philosophically informed understanding of how the welfare state should be designed and administered, one that makes room for some social welfare programs while still allowing for principled objections to the conception of the welfare state advocated by most on the American left. Some progress might be made by considering how fundamental conservative principles should lead conservatives to differ from liberals in their thinking about two central dimensions of the welfare state while still supporting some social programs: its cost and the role played by direct government action in its administration.

**Paying for the Welfare State**

In order to examine how conservatives should think about the cost of the welfare state, it may be useful to be-
gin by presenting certain tendencies in left-wing thinking about the issue. These tendencies rarely appear explicitly in the public utterances of any specific left-of-center thinker or politician, but as general patterns of thought they play an important role in shaping the American left's positions on the welfare state. Liberals generally tend to view the absolute quantity of resources consumed by social welfare programs as unimportant. To them, virtually any amount of spending is justified as long as it is fully funded through taxes. For example, the prominent left-wing commentator Ezra Klein recently claimed that Republicans who attacked the new health care law because of its high cost were making an irrelevant point because the law brought in more revenue than it spent. This position is typically justified using some version of the following argument: additional social welfare spending can be easily financed through significantly higher taxes on the very wealthy, and in view of how wealthy the United States already is, any reduced GDP growth that such tax increases would produce is worth accepting in order to guarantee access to basic necessities or promote economic equality. Furthermore, even when liberals come to see the cost of specific programs as intrinsically worrisome, they typically favor efforts to reduce those costs that involve using sophisticated administrative techniques to provide the same goods and services to beneficiaries while spending less—the Obama administration's push to have the Independent Payment Advisory Board (IPAB) set Medicare payment rates based on comparative-effectiveness research so that less money would be spent on less effective treatments is a good example of this latter tendency.

Conservatives' main basis for rejecting this view about the cost of social welfare programs derives from an attitude characteristic of our tradition: an awareness of the unpredictable and dangerous vicissitudes of history. Conservatives are acutely conscious of how fragile even the most stable human institutions have proven to be when confronted by unforeseen contingencies—it is because of this very understanding that they see the conservation of the existing order as a central task of politics. Because the deep pessimism about human nature that is central to conservatism makes them skeptical that creatures with our limited capacities will accurately predict which dangers might arise, they endeavor to perform this task in large part by working to cultivate resilience and flexibility in our society so that even the most serious threats will not be too destabilizing.

These dispositions should lead conservatives to be very suspicious of any position that sees economic growth as something that can easily be sacrificed. This is in large part because an expanding economy creates conditions which are vital for nurturing resilience. A society with good growth prospects can reward the risk-taking essential to innovation much more easily than a stagnant or contracting one can. Entrepreneurs in such a society driven to pursue their ambitions by the knowledge that large and growing pools of capital are available to finance their projects and that they can easily find other opportunities if they fail—innovators from throughout the world will be drawn there for the same reason. And a society where multitudes of creative risk-takers gather and thrive is likely to prove more resilient, both because its innovators can easily anticipate challenges before they arise and because it is likely to develop a culture that prizes and inculcates the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances. More concretely, a nation which does not maintain a reasonably high rate of GDP growth cannot preserve its economic position relative to other nations over time. Since military and diplomatic power are largely dependent on wealth, a nation whose economy is stagnant or shrinking as those of other nations can grow is highly vulnerable to shifts in the global balance of power that favor its adversaries.

Conservatives should be especially concerned about how the damage that large welfare states do to economic growth can compromise resilience because they have good reasons to think that much of that damage is very hard to reverse. No one needs to be reminded of how difficult it is for politicians to cut major social programs. Because any given beneficiary is likely to suffer more when benefits are reduced than any given taxpayer is to gain from the small change to his or her personal tax bill that would accompany any reduction, beneficiaries (including the firms that supply the services the welfare state pays for) have a strong incentive to resist cuts which is not matched by any comparable incentive motivating taxpayers to demand them. The unrest which has accompanied fiscal consolidation in Great Britain and other European states provides ample evidence of this fact. Even if pressure to lower taxes spurs politicians to act, they are likely to simply borrow money in order to keep social spending at the same level.

Furthermore, conservatives have long emphasized that cultural attitudes and institutions are easy to wipe out but very hard to deliberately rebuild, as no discrete group of people is likely to possess the knowledge required to consciously re-create complex social forms and blunt instruments like state power are poorly suited to the molding of beliefs and dispositions; we should expect the same to be true for the culture of entrepreneurship and flexibility that tends to accompany strong economic growth. We should also be skeptical of the left's preferred methods of reducing the costs of social welfare programs. In general, conservatism counsels doubt about proposals which purport to erase or blunt seemingly difficult tradeoffs. This attitude flows from the pessimism mentioned earlier—conservatives expect the
world to be largely harsh and unforgiving and are therefore suspicious of any claim to the contrary.

Since conservative principles yield strong reasons for departing from the American left’s view of the cost of social welfare programs, conservatives should develop an approach to thinking about the welfare state that places heavy emphasis on cost control without lapsing into libertarian purism. They should view the cost of a social welfare program as an independent factor to be weighed in evaluating its desirability in addition to the likelihood that it will achieve its objective. This means that conservatives should both be willing to argue in favor of a program that is less effective than the alternatives because it costs substantially less and to argue that proposed programs which do not achieve a certain cost-benefit ratio should not be implemented. However, the considerations discussed above differ from traditional rejections of the welfare state in that they are entirely compatible with accepting that the state has a legitimate role to play in providing economic security and fostering opportunity—they merely present another set of social goods against which these must be balanced. Framing a conservative approach to the welfare state around such considerations will allow them to present their worries about cost as part of an effort to weigh the tradeoffs between two sets of goods, both of which have genuine value, while still making arguments that are distinctively conservative. Furthermore, in emphasizing the need to balance competing values, arguments of this sort enable them to draw on one of the conservative tradition’s characteristic strengths: its willingness to honestly confront difficult realities and work to adapt to them rather than seeking to do away with them in some way.

Concerns about cost derived from characteristically conservative dispositions also offer a more principled basis upon which to ground two policies often advocated by conservative supporters of the welfare state, means-testing and vouchers. Proponents of both policies, especially libertarian-leaning ones, often argue for them reluctantly and seem to see them mainly as second-best alternatives to the minimal state they favor. However, the considerations discussed above give conservatives reasons to prefer a smaller state to a larger one merely because it is smaller, rather than because it represents a step on the road toward a government that exercises only a narrow set of legitimate powers. Conservatism therefore provides positive reasons for seeing vouchers and means-testing as intrinsically desirable, since both are straightforward ways of lowering the cost of social welfare programs. These policies differ from the cost-control schemes which most liberals advocate in part because they actually involve deliberate sacrifices of other goods in exchange for lower costs: means-testing requires the sacrifice of universal eligibility, while introducing vouchers is likely to lead to a transition period in which the quality of the goods and services provided by any given social program goes down temporarily as the markets in those products adjust to the change in the distribution of buying power. Critics on the left typically point to these likely consequences of both policies in order to argue against them, but the framework of ideas outlined above allows conservatives to make two potent responses. First, a large state is sufficiently harmful to the resilience and adaptability of our society that we should be willing to make fairly substantial sacrifices to shrink it. Second, cost-reduction efforts which explicitly acknowledge that tradeoffs must be made between cost and quality are more likely to succeed than those that do not because they reflect a more realistic appraisal of the limits of our flawed nature and the harsh realities of life place on human endeavors.

The Role of Direct Government Action

Again, the best way to develop a conservative approach to thinking about the role of direct government action in the administration of the welfare state is to first briefly examine the prevailing position on the left. By direct government action, I mean action taken by government agencies that is more extensive than simply providing money—for example, the American public school system involves more such action than a voucher system would because in the former the schools are run as well as paid for by the government. Liberals typically view the effectiveness of direct state action in contributing to the objective in question as the only criterion relevant to the question of whether it should be adopted. They also see no moral difference between more and less active roles for the government in the running of the welfare state. Therefore, they do not think that direct government action is either consistently better or worse than approaches which give markets a greater role.

Conservative principles provide a sound basis for rejecting the first dimension of this view. Conservatives have two good reasons to argue that government action becomes less and less effective the more that it moves from providing individuals with resources to trying to design the framework in which they make use of those resources.
resources. First, conservatism generally counsels wariness toward schemes of organizing social life in which a relatively small group of people personally design institutions that profoundly affect the lives of many others. This suspicion flows from the awareness of the limits of human cognitive capacities that has already been touched on—most people are only capable of acquiring genuine knowledge about matters to which they are closely connected in some way, and therefore we generally have difficulty thinking at the level of abstraction needed to create social programs which will serve millions of people. Therefore, we should be doubtful that officials designing a public school system or deciding what federally subsidized health insurance plans must cover can really know enough about the social-scientific complexities involved or the specific interests of each citizen to make policy in a way that truly promotes all or even most of those interests.

Furthermore, conservative pessimism about human nature leads us to note that social programs in which state power plays a direct and prominent role are likely to become entrenched in a way that makes innovation difficult. Any such program is likely to create a constituency with an incentive to avoid making changes that might be needed to make it more efficient or adapt to changing circumstances—its employees as well as the firms that they contract with to provide the program’s services. Because these people are not subject to market discipline, they have no countervailing reason to make the changes. They also are likely to have more political influence than program beneficiaries as well as a stronger desire to resist changes than taxpayers have to push for them, since any given taxpayer will benefit much less from any gains than any given employee or contractor will be hurt. Larger and more complex programs will generate bigger constituencies of this sort.

Conservatives should also contest the assumption by most on the left that there is no moral difference between direct government action and more indirect ways of assisting the needy. Their arguments should once more derive from a strand of conservative pessimism—namely, awareness that certain forms of struggle and difficulty cannot be eliminated from our lives without substantial costs. This is because the greatest human goods are only realized when people use their own talents and abilities to wrestle with obstacles—the satisfaction derived from greater material comfort, while important, cannot match the sense of accomplishment that comes from solving a difficult problem or mastering a complicated craft. These deeper satisfactions are characteristically personal, in the sense that one cannot passively receive them from others but must achieve them through independent decision-making and action. Therefore, they are available only in societies that give people the freedom to perform some difficult tasks without the aid of others. Programs in which direct government action plays a large role narrow the scope of this freedom, because in such programs the state makes many important decisions for citizens—it decides where their children should be educated, what types of health insurance and retirement plans they must have, and so on.

Many on the left will of course counter that markets can also place constraints on individual freedom and that a welfare state that gives direct government action a prominent role is therefore necessary to alleviate these constraints; however, conservatives can offer two replies that give them room to justify some social programs while still placing principled restrictions on the scope of government power. First, admitting that the market can sometimes infringe upon the autonomy that people need to realize vital human goods does not require denying that the state can also do so. Therefore, conservatives can accept this claim and strive to develop a set of policy proposals that aim to balance the limits that both institutions place on liberty against one another in order to render citizens as free as possible. This approach will sometimes involve preferring a less intrusive social program merely because a more intrusive alternative would restrict autonomy to an extent that its advantages do not justify; the widespread view on the left that effectiveness in providing tangible goods and services is the only relevant criterion to deciding which program to adopt cannot allow for this possibility. Second, the market and the state place very different types of constraints on individual freedom, and acknowledgment of this fact makes it possible for conservatives to contest the claim that programs involving direct government action are really necessary to combat the threats that markets pose to that freedom. Markets characteristically restrict liberty by depriving some citizens of even the minimum level of resources needed to truly exercise one’s liberty. Therefore, the appropriate response to the harm that they do is to ensure that each citizen has access to these resources—doing so does not, however, require placing restrictions on the use of these resources. While it is rarely possible in practice to help the needy through cash transfers alone, conservatives should argue for programs approximate this ideal as closely as possible, since additional state intervention is more likely to be unnecessary or harmful than helpful.

An approach to the welfare state which tries to make as many programs as possible approximate simple cash transfers to those in need also avoids both of the problems concerning the effectiveness of direct government action that were discussed above. It is not compromised by our limited access to the vast quantity of detailed information needed to design institutions because it does not charge anyone with the task of designing institutions. Like any other market-based approach, it instead
asks both consumers (in this case, program beneficiaries) and producers to figure out the rate at which they are willing to trade something they have for something they lack—this is a much more local and specific question and therefore far less susceptible to the problems of knowledge that plague institutional design. Government officials are only asked what minimum quantity of resources citizens need in order to meet basic needs—this is, of course, not an easy question, but answering it is far easier than determining which standardized curriculum will educate a large variety of children effectively or what medical problems every citizen must have protection against. Furthermore, because the government’s role will be so limited, constituencies with an incentive to prevent improvements in social programs are unlikely to arise. The bureaucracy involved will be relatively small and the state will not contract directly with any providers, so both those pressures will be reduced. Moreover, because firms providing the relevant goods and services must compete directly for the business of program beneficiaries who can spend their money wherever they choose to, there will be strong incentives to make the delivery of those goods and services as efficient as possible. However, both these advantages will only exist in markets which are reasonably free and competitive, and many of the sectors with which social programs are connected are heavily distorted by excessive regulation. Conservatives should therefore couple their efforts to move the welfare state in the direction outlined with targeted regulatory reform.

The concerns about freedom which initially motivated the introduction of this approach can also help to provide a principled basis for another position that is often advocated by conservatives who support some social welfare spending: the view that the welfare state should be designed to put its beneficiaries in a position where they no longer need government assistance. This idea derives from conservatives’ belief that the greatest human goods can only be realized through personal efforts. While social programs that involve minimal direct government action leave much more scope for recipients to decide important matters for themselves and thereby pursue the goods of accomplishment, such programs still deprive them of possibilities for achievement by providing them with resources that they would otherwise have to obtain through their own efforts. It is obviously true that this deprivation may often be the least bad option available, but it is still unfortunate and therefore programs should be designed to restore the lost opportunities as soon as possible. The practical implications of this principle will differ somewhat from program to program, but one obvious one is that programs should not provide incentives for beneficiaries who can fully support themselves by working not to do so. This involves, among other things, trying to ensure that benefits do not drop off so sharply when a beneficiary gets a job that the amount of benefits lost exceeds the amount of income gained. Programs which are specifically designed to substitute for productive employment, such as unemployment insurance and income support for poor families, should also include a component which actively helps recipients to develop skills that will eventually allow them to support themselves without program benefits.

Applying the Principles: Health Care

Having now laid out some considerations derived from conservative principles which might allow conservatives to embrace a version of the welfare state while still disagreeing vigorously with the left about how social programs should be designed, it may be instructive to consider how we might apply these principles in a specific case. Government provision of health care services is an obvious area to look at. Since the largest expansion of the American welfare state in several decades recently occurred in order to address various problems in the health care sector and conservatives were repeatedly criticized for failing to present a high-profile alternative to the Democratic proposal that eventually passed, it is worth thinking about what the conservative response should have been (and, perhaps, should be going forward, since the new health care law may still be repealed or substantially reformed). First, we should note the two main problems that the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) was designed to solve: inability to buy health insurance among some poorer Americans and those with pre-existing health problems who were too expensive to insure, and skyrocketing health care costs that were threatening to bankrupt existing federal health programs and making it increasingly harder for even insured people to receive treatment. The new law addresses the first problem by setting up a complex system of mandates on individuals and employers, restrictions on insurance company practices, and government-organized health insurance markets; it deals with the second largely by funding research designed to figure out how to provide health care of comparable quality more cheaply and applying that research to the setting of Medicare payment rates through the IPAB process described earlier.

Mindful of the point made earlier about the conditions under which an approach to the welfare state centered around cash transfers can succeed, conservatives should first note that the American health care sector is subject to serious government-created distortions. Most state governments imposed minimum requirements concerning the treatments covered and the level of coverage offered (meaning the amount of money a policyholder has to contribute before the insurer will begin paying)
even before PPACA was passed, and the new law has added even more such mandates. These rules price many consumers out of the health insurance market by making it illegal for companies to sell cheaper policies that cover less than what the rules prescribe. While some such requirements may be necessary, the officials responsible for setting them are vulnerable to the dynamics described earlier—doctors and medical device manufacturers continually lobby them to require coverage of treatments that are not medically necessary, and there is no countervailing lobby to resist the changes. The coverage level requirements also drive up treatment prices by insulating consumers from the costs of their spending decisions and thereby both leading them to overconsume health care services and freeing providers from the need to strive for lower costs. Furthermore, insurance companies are barred from selling policies in more than one state, which needlessly narrows the number of producers competing and therefore prevents improvements in both price and quality that would otherwise occur. In order to apply a revised conservative view of the role of government to health policy, therefore, we should begin by taking a page from the standard approach—regulation of insurance company practices should be scaled back substantially.

Conservatives should deal with the problems that PPACA was designed to address in the following way. First, the federal government should provide means-tested subsidies to partially or fully cover the cost of purchasing high-deductible insurance policies (policies whose terms require the policyholder to contribute a substantial amount before the insurance company begins paying). Second, each working adult should be given a health-savings account (HSA) into which he or she is required to annually deposit a certain share of his or her income; this income will not be taxed if it is used to pay for health expenses. Contributions should be required by default but an opt-out procedure should be available. Unspent funds remaining in an HSA at the end of a given year will be available in subsequent years and can always be withdrawn, though they will then become taxable income. Low-income citizens should have their HSAs partly or fully subsidized so that they are equivalent to the value of the deductible in a policy eligible for subsidies. The HSA and premium subsidies should replace Medicaid, the federal program that now provides low-income citizens with access to health care. Third, citizens who can verify that they are unable to afford a high-deductible policy because they have a preexisting health condition should be enrolled in a government program in which the state will pay all costs which exceed the standard annual cost of a policy eligible for subsidies. Fourth, a similar program should gradually be phased in as a replacement for Medicare, the public insurance program for elderly Americans. The government would pay the share of an elderly person's premiums which was added to the standard premium because of his or her age. Both the elderly and those with preexisting conditions would also be eligible for income-based subsidies.

This set of policies solves the problems which plague our health-care sector while remaining faithful to the principles outlined above. Providing fixed cash payments rather than creating new institutions which citizens are required to use allows people to retain substantial control over their lives while still addressing the needs of the least well-off and enabling society to benefit from the efficiency made possible by markets. The use of means-testing provides a straightforward cost-control mechanism for the program itself. Restricting subsidies to high-deductible insurance policies and offering HSAs addresses the rising costs that are causing the access problems by giving consumers and providers new incentives to spend wisely and reduce prices, respectively. Both policies also indirectly provide a way of controlling the amount of public spending needed, since the market forces they unleash will eventually drive down the cost of the health care services that this scheme requires the state to fund. Allowing people to opt out of contributing to HSAs and withdraw funds at any time also helps to accommodate the concerns about freedom discussed above. The programs for people with preexisting conditions and the elderly address this problem in a way that limits the scope of the government's fiscal commitments and allows market forces to operate. The former also avoids the many pitfalls of the effort to ban preexisting-condition exclusions that is part of the new health-care law, which include de facto price controls to prevent companies from pricing those with preexisting conditions out and an intrusive mandate on all citizens to purchase health insurance which is required to ensure that a ban on exclusions does not bankrupt insurance companies by letting people wait until they get sick to buy policies. The latter fulfills Medicare's purpose of helping elderly people cope with the difficulty incurring insurance that accompanies advanced age while offering greater scope for individuals to make their own decisions about the use of health care services.

“Providing fixed cash payments rather than creating new institutions which citizens are required to use allows people to retain substantial control over their lives while still addressing the needs of the least well-off.”
Many conservatives are likely to balk at the proposals offered above. They will contend that matters of principle as weighty as the constraints on the legitimate exercise of state power should never be abandoned for reasons of political expediency. And there is much truth in such arguments – as I noted earlier, a party which gives principle no place in its policy decisions will ultimately become a slave to interest groups. However, principles can be relaxed somewhat to permit responses to problems which a politically viable movement cannot ignore without being abandoned entirely. In the pages above, I have been careful to emphasize that conservatives should still be willing to fight for fiscal prudence and limits on the state’s power to interfere in citizens’ private lives. However, I have sought to recover justifications of those goals that allow the right to embrace some social-welfare spending while remaining authentically conservative. A movement that is unwilling to allow for even this much compromise risks making the perfect the enemy of the good. And it would be truly unfortunate if conservatives, who have long prided themselves on their ability to see past their opponents’ ideological abstractions and deal with reality as it is, were to make that mistake.

If you’ve had an opportunity to peruse the latest works by some of the more vitriolic members of the conservative movement, you will have noticed that a rather unusual term has entered the lexicon of “synonyms for liberal.” From relatively high brow figures like, say, Jonah Goldberg, to the openly populist Glenn Beck, the term progressive has really come into its own as a pejorative description for those on the modern day American left. But when these writers and talk show hosts are using the term, they are not merely polishing a new club with which to hit liberals with, but are rather connecting modern liberalism to the American progressive movement, a reform-oriented political and social movement that started right around the turn of the last century, and, as the traditional narrative goes, ended with the onset of the “roaring twenties.”

This is not merely a phenomenon of the right. In a debate leading up to the 2008 election, Hillary Clinton declared that she really was not a liberal, but “considered [herself] an American Progressive.” Why has there been such an increased interest in progressivism? Where does it come from? And what lessons does the Progressive era have to teach us about modern politics?

At one level, the interest is purely academic. It is far from controversial to claim that the Progressive era represented one of the most monumental eras of reform in American history. It is also far from controversial to claim that the reforms enacted during this era—including, but not limited to the establishment of the Federal Reserve, the creation of the Food and Drug Administration, the establishment of national parks, the expansion of direct ballot initiatives, recall, and referendum, the direct election of Senators—all play a major role in shaping the modern political and social landscape.

But another school of thought, one that is becoming more dominant in conservative circles, holds that progressivism is not merely a label to attach to modern liberals in hope of obfuscating their principles, but is rather the preeminent intellectual origin of modern liberalism. They further hold that, even as the specific elements

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of their platform have changed, the same intellectual foundations, conceits, and villains exist in both. Although the intellectual strains of American progressivism contained many idiosyncrasies and disagreements existed amongst its greatest practitioners, what remains consistent is a philosophical program. Built upon the historicist framework of German non-Marxist followers of Hegel but tinged with an American appreciation for democracy and equality, it ultimately provided the intellectual basis for the New Deal and culminated politically with the Great Society. Serious foundational ideas found in progressive literature, like an emphasis on the notion of an inevitable “progress” or the importance of an administratively run bureaucratic state as a response to political or economic uncertainty, coupled with advocacy for the increased “democratization” of society, shape the boundaries of liberal intellectual discourse today.

From a distance, the question of who the progressives were is a rather easy question of the historical record. There existed a very prominent Progressive political party, and a progressive caucus in the both the Republican and Democratic parties. Yet, the question remains less cut-and-dry because the important figures of progressivism, with a few exceptions, were not found in the House of Representatives, but in the halls of academia, particularly at the “new” German research institutions, Johns Hopkins University, and the University of Chicago, and in the Ivy League, particularly Princeton.

Progressives were among the leading intellectuals, thinkers, activists, and politicians of the 1880s through the 1920s. What makes someone a progressive is the basic adherence to several key ideas concerning rights, History, administration, and democracy. Other elements of the progressive agenda—like foreign policy—were far more contentious within the progressive movement, but this basic intellectual framework defined progressivism.

The essence of Progressivism is the rejection of the natural rights and social contract theories underlying the founding of the United States and the Declaration and Constitution. While these were certainly not the first American theorists to reject the concept of the social contract, they were the first to levy a sustained attack against the foundations of the American Constitution and, particularly, the philosophy undergirding it. The use of “nature” by the founders and notions of “inalienable” rights strikes against the heart of the progressive project. Progressives argued that the rapid modernization undertaking the United States at the turn of the century, particularly the great economic and political uncertainty that came with the end of the first great industrial era in American history, required a more dynamic vision of the role of government. They thought that the state should not be constrained by republican measures to prevent too much action, but rather be guided by the best of modern science (natural and social) and capable of acting in whatever ways were necessary.

As reductionist as this may sound, progressivism, in its heart of heart, is the sustained belief in progress. Progress means, essentially, that human events have an easily deducible direction. History has moved beyond being “one damn thing after another,” as noted Progressive historian Carl Becker once put it, but is now a meaningful expression of direction and distance. History, in the most Hegelian way possible, has a knowable end. Intellectual, political, and social development would all culminate in a singular end, one that after we’ve reached it, would illuminate what choices we need to make now to get there. Paradoxically, progress is both inevitable and within our powers to achieve. Progressives saw only the light of progress as their guide, and the sciences and other modern forms of knowledge attainment as the only tools needed. Progress, both social and political, became the only goal.

It wasn’t just politics that took on a Progressive dimension; the Progressive project, as much as anything, aimed to alter the fundamental moral notions of our nation. Progressivism substituted the notion of unchanging rights, natural rights or natural law—all of which meant there were permanent standards of right and wrong — with a new kind of progressive morality, in which the only moral dimensions available became forward or back. Charles Merriam, a leading Progressive political scientist, wrote that “the individualistic ideas of the ‘natural right’ school of political theory…are discredited and repudiated…. The origin of the state is regarded, not as the result of a deliberate agreement among men, but as the result of historical development, instinctive rather than conscious; and rights are considered to have their source not in nature, but in law.” Morality and other transcendent codes of justice become defined by conventions and therefore the state; nothing of any moral power exists beyond the conventional law codified by the state, as a product of its time.

Socially or politically traditional ideas and institutions became malevolent (hence the rise of the pejorative reactionary) and the new deliberately and rationally created ideas became intrinsically good. Rights, insofar as they were useful, only existed as creations of the time at which they were talked about; old concepts of natural rights needed to be replaced by more nebulous concepts like “Human rights” and social rights. As Teddy Roosevelt expressed it, “property rights [one of the banes of Progressivism] to the exclusion of human rights, had first mortgage on the Constitution.” Meaningful and eternal rights are a major impediment to the progressive project, something that puts Progressivism directly in contrast with the principles of our founding.
From this moral framework arose a sustained criticism of our Founding, not necessarily as a malevolent force, but as simply an outdated one. For what it is worth, some Progressives would pay some sort of needed social due to the founders, but only as the embodiment of the “progressive ethos” for their time. For the most part, though, Progressives approached the Founding as if it was an irrelevant fact of our nation’s history. The Constitution, as the manifestation of the Founders’ belief in the separation and balancing of powers, was to be circumvented in the name of progress. And certainly, according to these progressive critics, the relevance of the Constitution need not be large because it is simply an 18th century document, and America, as they put it, now faced 20th century problems. The limited, but vibrant, government created by the Founders was fine for the 18th century, but given the massive social and political upheaval following the Civil War, America needed, according to the Progressives, a new means of dealing with new problems.

The Founders’ belief that the purpose of government is tied to the protection of individual rights against the dual prospects of anarchy and tyranny ran directly contrary to the view the Progressives held. Underlying the emphasis on eternal rights is a (Lockean) belief in the permanence of human nature: that certain flaws exist intrinsically in man and the best a political system can hope to do is to mediate them so as not abridge fundamental, natural rights. In doing this, the Founders were primarily concerned about the ways in which the government can tyrannize people, and they thought that even a democratically elected republican government needs to be cognizant of natural rights.

Progressives saw such talk as tied to outmoded ways of thinking. They thought that the Founders’ worries about the tyranny of government from a democratic nation, however appropriate they were in their time, no longer applied because we had all accepted the moral proposition tyranny was intrinsically evil. The purpose of government went from a limited one of protecting against abuses of natural rights to a corrective and redemptive one. Accordingly, Progressives placed no limits on the functions and powers that a democratic government could perform. Progressive political theorist John Dewey wrote that “[t]he state has the responsibility for creating institutions under which individuals can effectively realize the potentialities that are theirs”, implying an obligation from government to the people that goes well beyond freedom and safety, but extends to more nebulous roles like fulfillment. Any impediments to a government capable of performing such tasks needed to be eliminated by Progressives in order for their political and social reforms to take place. This imperative brought forth their contempt for the political machinery built into the Constitution.

The obstructionist elements of the American Constitution, the elements designed to prevent rapid unilateral change, were the parts most decried by Progressives. Theodore Roosevelt, in one of his most Progressive moments, wished to drastically alter the Constitution’s roadblocks to policy making by radically democratizing both the Courts and the Senate. A series of amendments to the Constitution that he proposed in the 1912 election, and considered the most important elements of his progressive platform, would have essentially eliminated all republican restraints of power in our government.

His first proposed amendment, which was eventually passed, was the direct election of Senators. This was, ostensibly, designed to minimize the corruption in the then-current model under which the state legislature appointed the Senator, but the amendment also served to weaken the powers and interests of any individual state. The direct election of Senators eliminated any say the state and local governments would have, beyond simple petitioning, in regards to the federal government, and allowed for a greater congruency between the opinions of the members of the House and the Senate because they would be elected in essentially similar ways.

The second proposed amendment, a far more radical one, would have created the process of “judicial recall and review”, meaning that the people could overturn any decision made by the judiciary if a majority did not like it. This amendment, even more than the first one, would have radically destabilized politics in America in a way that Roosevelt would have liked; Progressive reforms, never more popular than in the 1912 election, would have probably been pushed through over the (token) opposition of the judiciary.

As bad as this amendment seems—and completely making the American judicial system subservient to the whims of a bare majority is an affront to republican principles—it was nothing compared to the crown jewel of the Roosevelt 1912 campaign, an amendment eliminating the need of a supermajority to amend the Constitution. This, Roosevelt thought, was the fulcrum of the great Progressive reforms the country firmly needed. No longer would we be tied down to an outmoded 18th century system of governance, but we would be able to reform the country in the ways done in...
other nations. Roosevelt lamented that, as it then stood, “the constitution is a dead form, holding back the people’s growth, shackling the people’s strength, but giving a free hand to malign powers that prey upon the people.” Roosevelt wanted to make “the people themselves…the ultimate makers of their Constitution.”

Directly democratic reforms weren’t all about restructuring the Constitution. Progressive intellectuals, including President Wilson, were adamantly opposed to the two party system. In their view, it fostered divided decision-making and diminished the individual’s say in his or her own government. Part of the Progressive project of having the people as the makers of the Constitution was decentralizing the power of political parties to make choices and eliminating their ability to obfuscate about their own positions and others. Things like the primary system, the rise of ballot initiatives, and the recall election were part of this general progressive platform of redistribution power in political parties.

But direct democracy was far from the only aspect of the progressive political project. Their other major goal was the establishment of a technically competent administrative apparatus, designed to realize the political will of the people. The extent to which Progressives believed government intervention was necessary—from regulating railroads to managing the environment—required a regulatory system far greater than anything yet seen before in American history. The ideal was a bureaucracy, staffed with devoted professionals, that would be able to make the most rational and, therefore, neutral decisions about managing American life. Progressive faith in bureaucracy rested in their belief in the infallibility of expertise.

This accords with to Progressive belief in direct democracy, although in a very different way than just the belief in direct democracy, because Progressives wished to eliminate non-technical decision making from the implementation side of policy, while still maintaining the “will” of the people. Constitutional roadblocks to complete efficiency within government like checks-and-balances limited these experts’ ability to mediate the will of the people. Wilson, in his seminal 1880 essay The Study of Administration, writes extensively about the role administrative bureaucracy played in the modernization of Germany. Recognizing the limits that our Constitution places on the development of such an infrastructure, Wilson is adamant about importing the best elements of the Prussian system to America. The ways in which Bismarck effectively combined creating a “serious” welfare state and imposing a “properly guided” regulatory infrastructure greatly appealed to Wilson’s own vision for what he wanted to do in the United States. Interestingly enough, Wilson quotes Hegel’s Philosophy of Right in justifying the expansive administrative state as something that is the culmination of “the spirit of the time.”

It is this idealized Prussian infrastructure, the embodiment of Weberian “legal/rational administration”, that Wilson wished to impose on the American political system. What was needed in these administrative bureaucracies, Wilson argued, were people who, like him recognized where history itself was going and were cognizant of all the complexities it implied. Politics was no longer thought to be the proper mode of decision making for such a complex society. Wilson thought that “the steady and unmistakable growth of nationality of sentiment” had eliminated the need to manage against faction, because we had all begun to realize the ultimate ends of government. The science of Administration was to be the ultimate source of authority for regulation, leaving almost unfettered power in the hands of bureaucrats.

Roosevelt, again in the 1912 election, wished to create “a national industrial commission” that had “complete power to regulate and control all the great industrial concerns engaged in interstate business—which practically means all of them in this country.” This would essentially be regulation by bureaucratic fiat, not by law; “[a]ny corporation voluntarily coming under the commission should not be prosecuted under the antitrust law as long as it obeys in good faith the orders of the commission.” President Wilson tried to establish a similar bureaucracy in 1913, calling it the Federal Trade Commission. Senator Albert Cummins, one of the architects of the FTC felt that it was something that could exist beyond politics, because of “our faith and confidence in administrative tribunals” as a just and neutral adjudicator. Luckily, the FTC that ended up being created had virtually no teeth, and was something of a regulatory laughstock for the better part of the 20th century. But underlying it was the Progressive belief in the science of administration.

A rather important feature of Progressivism is this very clear tension between its directly democratic ethos, and its “scientific” approach to governance; American Progressives believed in both the well-managed state, run by men of the best expertise available, and, at the same time, in a completely democratic regime. The political apparatus would be democracy and the administrative apparatus would be expertise. Embedded in this view was
the same veiled Hegelian historicism; since history had an end, there must exist in every situation the obviously correct policy choice, which Progressives thought of as only knowable through the use of administrative expertise. The will of the people would, if freed from other constraints, find this essentially correct policy because it would be in accordance with their interests. The belief in direct democracy is not unlike Rousseau's belief in the General Will; it is not an arguable account because man, if freed completely from his chains, would be completely aware of the proper political solution, so whatever policy was produced in the most democratic way possible was, by definition, the best. And, if a policy was in accord with the General Will, it was therefore Historically correct; the Progressives thus sought to combine Hegel and Rousseau.

The result of this combination is twofold. First, dissent from the Progressive project is simply not feasible, because, like the General Will, it is by definition correct. Accepting Progressive epistemological proclamations on progress and knowledge essentially creates a dialectic between Progress, science and the future on the one hand, and tradition, reaction, and restraint on the other hand. Conservatism, in this view, is only useful insofar as it provides an intellectual corrective to the more correct progressives; the idea of excess on the part of progressives was entertained, but not seriously considered, given that they move with history. The other major implication of the Progressive project is the basic tension between their democratic and administrative elements. When the people deviate from the Progressive policy on any given issue, say during a referendum, Progressives explain these lapses as the people not recognizing what is best for them, either through corporate, religious, or prejudicial influences. They do so in order to avoid confronting the implications of their belief in democracy. This is not terribly different from Marxist explanations of deviations from the class based dialectic model, a point that is crucial in understanding the relationship between Marxism and Progressivism.

Progressives, for all the issues that I have brought up, are fundamentally not Marxists. This is an absolutely essential point to understanding them. They consider themselves an American corrective against Marxist socialism, and champion democratic and liberal reforms. Although they share with the Marxists a Hegelian view of history, the Progressives deviate in that they do not see an actualized end to history, let alone a Communist state as that end. Class distinctions, crucial to any Marxist understandings of history, are largely ignored by Progressives, who hope to mollify any serious labor discontentment with a generous welfare policy and a robust regulatory prerogative. The means of Progress are the only positives the progressive’s recognize as an absolute, so Marxist notions of a “general strike” or the righteousness of the Proletariat revolution are not only not in accordance with the Progressive vision for America, but, even more so, are fundamentally opposed to it.

I take great issue with some of my friends on the right who group together Progressives with Marxists or Proto-fascists. What differentiates the progressives from these groups is their fundamental Americanism, the overarching belief in the righteousness of democracy. Granted, the progressive rejection of the Anglo-Enlightenment is rather similar to that their fascist and Marxist counterparts, and many of the same texts that influenced American progressives also became the intellectual foundations of fascist thought. So it is not unreasonable to see elements of Fascism or Marxism in Progressivism, but at the same time, it is even more important to recognize the differences.

For conservatives, it is crucial to fully understand progressivism because it, in so many ways, provides the intellectual building blocks for modern liberalism. What I hoped to focus on in this essay was, in fact, the eternal similarities between progressivism and liberalism. I tried not to cherry pick the most egregious examples of progressive malfeasance (like their support for racial eugenics), but rather to explore the fundamental truths underlying their beliefs. Future pieces on the subject of Progressivism can go more in detail about the direct connections to modern liberalism, particularly through the mediation of Franklin Roosevelt. Still, understanding Progressive views on administration, democracy, and the inevitability of History, is a major part of fully recognizing, and therefore more successfully combating modern liberalism. It is no accident that many of the most popular liberal domestic policies of the last 50 years or so, things like national healthcare and an agency devoted to environmental protection, were ideas created and first thought through during the Progressive era. Conservatives need to recognize not only what they stand for, but what we, in turn, wish to return to. We must be cognizant of the principles of the American founding rejected by Progressives, and we must really understand both. The fight between Progressivism and American Constitutionalism is far from over, and conservatives need to know which side we’re on and why.

This is the first in the author’s series on American Progressivism. In the next issue he will explore the historical ascendency of Progressivism and those who opposed it.
I.

Being a society in crisis is not the same as being a society with “problems”. Problems are temporary and soluble. But a crisis seems to hit much deeper. There must be something in the air, some feeling that society is on the brink of disaster, staring into the abyss. Israelis very much feel this way. Different people may have different interpretations of the crisis, but that the crisis is there has become undeniable.

Israelis feel their country has at some point gone astray. The lofty ideals espoused by its founders fade into memory and are cataloged as utopian aspirations. Rather than a model society, “a light unto the nations”, Israel now deals with poverty, war, and a loss of faith in the reasons for its existence. Some have named this crisis “The Battle for Israel’s Soul”. This is a good way to describe it, because it immediately brings to mind the old philosophical question raised by Plato of how the soul should be properly ordered. In the classics the question of the individual’s soul was inseparable from the question of the best regime, and therefore the question of soul becomes a political question of the highest order. Moreover, as it is in Plato, the “battle for the soul” is also a question of the proper education. Politics and education are inseparable. And a great part of the origins of Israel’s current crisis can be traced back to its education system. The “Battle for Israel’s Soul” will not be fought on the ground, but within the walls of academia.

Looking to the intellectual battlefield, one could not help noticing the rise of an unusual star: Hannah Arendt. To an American reader, this may sound surprising, as in America Arendt had been a figure much debated and discussed for years. Since her death in 1975, and even more so since the 1990’s, Arendt scholarship has been on a steady increase, not just in America, but in the world as a whole. Streets, research institutes, prestigious awards, and even a train line connecting Hannover and Berlin have been named in her honor. Arendt’s reception was not always positive (one need only to remember the historian Russell Jacoby’s claim that “If her star shines so brightly it is because the American intellectual firmament is so dim”), but criticism of Arendt does not take away from the fact that she is a much-discussed figure in the academic world.

Arendt’s reception in Israel was completely different. Until the late 1990’s, Arendt’s name was largely absent from either public or academic discourse. There were a few individual responses to her 1963 coverage of the Eichmann Trial, notably by distinguished Israeli historian Jacob Talmon, but on the whole, Arendt was virtually ignored. Reasons for this dismissal seem to be historical. Arendt originally became popular in the early 1950’s, with the publication of her book “The Origins of Totalitarianism”. The world at the time was still trying to understand what was happening. The Second World War had ended with a resounding victory of the Allies over the Fascist dictatorship, but a new totalitarian threat was hovering over Europe, this time from the Communist east. The recent destruction of Europe’s Jews at a pace and with a brutality hitherto unknown had made people think again about the origins of evil and hatred. In Asia, Africa and the Middle East, nations began to revolt against the imperialist conquerors and demanded independence. “The Origins of Totalitarianism”, divided into the three sections “Anti-Semitism”, “Imperialism”, and “Totalitarianism”, tied all the knots together. It was a timely book that offered a timely analysis. But there was something more about Arendt. She offered an entirely novel way to think about the western philosophical tradition. She challenged

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In the 1950’s and ‘60’s, when Arendt became famous for her critique of totalitarianism, Israel was still a young democracy dealing with questions of establishment. Before turning to philosophy, Israel still had to secure its borders, and accommodate for the thousands of refugees that arrived en masse on its shores."

In an age characterized by revolutions in the Third World, and student uprisings in the west, Arendt seemed more relevant than ever to a generation in search of a spiritual leader. Post-modernists who challenged meta-narratives were fascinated with Arendt’s deconstruction of the western philosophical tradition. Post-colonialists were drawn to her analysis of the origins and consequences of imperialism. Marxists and socialists were sympathetic to her analysis of the role of capital and trade in the formation of government policy, and to her writings about revolution. Historians and sociologists were drawn to her interdisciplinary approach. Anti-communist Liberals supported her anti-Soviet rhetoric (as in her article about the 1956 Hungarian Revolt). And let us also not forget the feminists, who saw in Arendt a sole female representative in an almost exclusively male philosophical canon. It is easy to see why Arendt reached an idol-like status; a rare position in her field. Yet in Israel things were different. In the 1950’s and ‘60’s, when Arendt became famous for her critique of totalitarianism, Israel was still a young democracy dealing with questions of establishment. Before turning to philosophy, Israel still had to secure its borders, and accommodate for the thousands of refugees that arrived en masse on its shores. The problems of the hour took precedence, and Arendt received very little attention, if at all, even though she was already quite well-known.

The change in her status in Israel came about only in 1997, when a special conference was dedicated to her at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Then, in 2000, her book on the Eichmann Trial was translated into Hebrew for the first time. In 2003, another special conference took place, this time at the University of Tel-Aviv. The papers from these Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv conferences were published in book-form, and over the years other translations into Hebrew, by or about her, were published. These include Arendt’s biography (“For Love of the World” by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl), her monumental “The Origins of Totalitarianism”, and her series of lectures on Kant’s political philosophy. In 2009, even a play was produced based on her youthful romance with Heidegger.

Was Israel merely catching up with what has been called by renowned British historian Walter Laqueur the “Arendt cult”? Perhaps. Maybe the current crisis is making Israelis look for new spiritual leaders where they did not look before. And indeed, there are good reasons to turn to Arendt. After all, she is considered one of the foremost Jewish thinkers in the twentieth century. Moreover, she is one of the only Jewish thinkers famous on an international scale who dedicated a considerable amount of her corpus to the question of Jewish Sovereignty, Zionism. Yet there is something problematic about Israelis turning to Arendt for spiritual leadership at this time of crisis. An examination of her Zionist writings reveal a person terribly conflicted over the question of Jewish nationhood. This would not have been a problem in itself, as many Jews have expressed similar anxieties about the Zionist project. The problem is that Arendt seems to have allowed her personal conflicts to turn into a political theory that is at times delusional, and at times quite venomous. It is therefore debatable whether Arendt is really the spiritual guide that Israelis need at this hour.

II.

The genesis of Arendt’s views on Zionism seems to be intricately bound with her biography. She was born in 1906 to an assimilated middle-class Jewish home in Germany. In 1924 she began studying at the University of Marburg, where she met the charismatic Martin Heidegger. As is well-known by now, the two began an affair that would affect Arendt deeply for the rest of her life. It eventually caused her to change her place of study, transferring to the University of Heidelberg, where she wrote her doctoral dissertation on Saint Augustine under the supervision of the psychologist and philosopher Karl Jaspers. When the Nazis came to power, Arendt escaped to Paris, where she became close with the Zionist activist Kurt Blumenfeld. Under Blumenfeld’s influence, Arendt started defining herself a Zionist. While in Paris she assisted Jewish children refugees’ emigration to the Mandate of Palestine (governed by Britain at the time), and wrote pamphlets advocating the creation of a Jewish Army to help in the struggle against Nazism. Unfortunately for her, the only ones to express interest in her initiative were representatives of the right-wing Irgun in America, whose help she rejected. At the same time, Arendt wrote a biography of the Jewish salon hostess Rahel Varnhagen, who converted to Christianity in attempt to be better accepted by Aryan society. In
1941, Arendt relocated to the United States, and became a naturalized citizen in 1950. In 1951 she published “The Origins of Totalitarianism”, which made her a popular speaker across campuses in America and Europe. In 1961, she was sent on behalf of “The New Yorker” to report on the Eichmann Trial.

The series of reports she published from the trial caused a big scandal in her relationship with the Jewish community. But this relationship was never easy. Although she never denied being Jewish, Arendt’s view of her own Jewish identity was rather ambiguous. Academically, at least, Arendt didn’t really seem to take an interest in Jews or Jewish matters unless it involved non-Jews. After all, she wrote her doctoral dissertation on a Christian saint. She wrote a biography of a Jewess who converted to Christianity in attempt to be accepted by gentile society. She always dealt with Jews in the context of European phenomena – Romanticism, Nationalism, Socialism, Nazism, etc. – and as Chicago’s Professor of History Bernard Wasserstein has recently shown, her understanding of the Jewish condition in Europe in the modern period was based mostly on anti-Semitic propaganda. The Eichmann reports merely exacerbated an inner conflict Arendt must have been feeling throughout her life between her Jewish and German identities. Michael Wyschogrod, professor emeritus of philosophy at City University of New York, who knew Arendt personally, attests that “Arendt was as deeply German as they came, although she did not lack a significant Jewish identity. I suspect, however, that her German identity was deeper than her Jewish one”. His suspicion seems to be correct. Arendt herself wrote after the “Eichmann scandal” that if she “can be said to ‘have come from anywhere’, it is from the tradition of German philosophy”.

Arendt’s attempt to distance herself from the Jews seems to have taken the most venomous turn when it concerned Israeli Jews. Although she considered the judges in the Eichmann Trial to be the “best of German Jewry”, and the prosecuting attorneys “Galicians, but still Europeans”, everyone else present at the trial was cast as barbaric. She wrote to her husband: “everything is organized by a police force that gives me the creeps, speaks only Hebrew, and looks Arabic. Some downright brutal types among them. They would obey any order. And outside the doors, the oriental mob, as if one were in Istanbul or some other half-Asiatic country”. Indeed, harsh. Especially in comparison with her accounts of Germany in other letters, where everything was wunderschön, the forests were beautiful, and the Rheine waters crystal clear.

But why such malice? Why such spiteful words? Was she distancing herself from the Israelis in order to better distance herself from the Jews in general? We should not discount such an option. Following the “Eichmann controversy”, renowned Kabbalah scholar Gerschom Scholem wrote to her saying that it bothered him she lacked any “Love of the Jewish people”. Surprisingly (or not), Arendt replied that he was right. “I am not moved by any ‘love’ of this sort […] I have never ‘loved’ any people or collective – neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American, nor the working class or anything of that sort. I indeed love ‘only’ my friends”. But it is one thing to “not love” a people. With the Israelis, her sentiments seem to border on downright contempt, and suggest a prejudice that is deep-rooted.

Indeed, looking over her writings from the 1940’s and early 1950’s, the years before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, and during the first years of Israel’s existence, one is struck by how consistent Arendt’s disdain for anything Israeli really was. She criticized the Zionist movement all the way back to its inception in the 19th century, and from her depiction it appears that the whole development of Jewish sovereignty was one protracted catastrophe. She also gave the Zionist movement several pieces of advice on how to avoid the imminent calamity she was describing.

Unfortunately for her, as happened with her earlier suggestions about the establishment of a Jewish Army, her comments were ignored by the Zionist establishment. Was this the reason for her animosity towards Israelis? We cannot know for certain. But we can hardly blame the Israeli establishment for not heeding to her advice. Her suggestions seem to move on the vector between implausible on the one hand, and bizarre on the other. Let us then turn to examining her actual views.

### III.

Norman Podhoretz, who had many conversations with Arendt on the subject of Zionism, summed them up in his memoir in the following way: “What exactly she wanted I have never been able to ascertain; mainly she seemed intent on showing that everyone else was wrong”. But let us examine the validity of his remarks. After all, Arendt wrote a series of articles elucidating her views on the subject.

Her opinions were based on the assumption that the age of nation-states was about to pass from the world. She believed the nation state was “neither capable of protecting the existence of the nation nor able to guarantee the sovereignty of the people”, and for that reason the “problem of how to organize politically” would be solved from that point onwards only through “adopting either the form of empire or the form of federations”. She wanted to put in place “the fundamentals of an international community, capable of
presenting and protecting the civilization of the modern world”, and since she judged the age of nation-states to be over, she rejected the Zionist national solution. She accused Zionism of not being in alignment with history, and therefore saw in Zionism an experiment doomed to failure, like all attempts at creating nation-states. Writing some years before the Jews succeeded in establishing a state, and several decades before 1989 brought a new wave of nation-states into being, Arendt predicted the imminent disappearance of this form of political organization. Her analysis is reminiscent of, among others, Vladimir Lenin, who also spoke of the eventual “withering away of the state”.

But she did not exactly reject Zionism altogether. Unlike some who believe that the Jews could be resettled in Europe – solutions proposed by example by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad or Helen Thomas – Arendt did see a place for Jews in the Middle East. Just not in their own state. She believed that the Jewish-Arab question was impossible to solve through the national framework. Being the political theorist that she claimed to be, she thus embarked on suggesting to the Jews a way to resolve their conflict with the Arabs. Her advice was to emulate the example of the Soviet model of settling national conflicts (): the Soviet Union’s “entirely new and successful approach to nationality conflicts, its new form of organizing different peoples on the basis of national equality”. Granted, she wrote these things in 1944, when the full extent of Soviet atrocities was not yet known. But to recommend the Soviet approach seems bewildering, especially from a woman who in a few years would publish a book on totalitarianism.

She thought that a good solution would be something resembling a “bi-national Palestine State or a Jewish Commonwealth”. But we should bear in mind that her solution is not that same as the modern bi-national state solution. Rather, her ideas resemble the 19th century utopian communities conceived by Marx or, again, Lenin. Arendt believed in the establishment of “local Arab-Jewish committees under the supervision and the auspices of an international authority”, and the creation of a “federated state” governed by “Jewish-Arab community councils”.

Instead of a Jewish State, she advised the Jews to aspire to construct a “homeland”. In this homeland, “local self-government and mixed Jewish-Arab municipal and rural councils, on a small scale and as numerous as possible, are the only realistic political measures that can eventually lead to the political emancipation of Palestine”. Other than this solution, she saw “not a single possible solution or proposition” that could solve the problems. The use of the term “realistic” is not meant to be ironic.

Arendt imagined a Middle East similar in style to the European model of integration that was being established at the time. She advocated the idea of a “federated state” and a “Confederation of Palestine” that could serve as model not only for the Jews and Arabs, but also for other conflicts in the Middle East, such as that between Christian Lebanon and Muslim Syria.

It is important to mention that Arendt acknowledged that these ideas were not her own. Their origins can be found with a group of Jewish intellectuals who established an organization generally known by the name of “Brit Shalom” (The Alliance for Peace). Some of its more well-known members include the aforementioned Scholem, and also Martin Buber. But whereas Scholem and Buber remained Zionists, Arendt did not. This group never consisted of more than a few dozen intellectuals at the time, and was pretty much disbanded by the late 1930’s. Nonetheless, despite its brief life, Brit Shalom elicited waves of nostalgia disproportionate to its level of influence. Here was a group of Jews sincerely committed to sharing the land with the local Arabs. The fact that their ideas were rejected has served as “proof” to several generations of left-wing Jews (and others) that Israelis are just not interested in peace. More recently, acclaimed gender studies professor Judith Butler of Berkeley expressed such ideas. But this nostalgia is often accompanied by selective memory. The reason that the group disbanded was not because the mainstream Zionist establishment rejected them. It was because of the lack of a similar initiative on the Arab side.

To Arendt this mattered little. The supposed rejection of “Brit Shalom” ideas just proved to her once again the horrible trajectory the Zionist movement followed. In her defense, it must be said that she applied severe criticism to the Arab side as well. She believed that both Jews and Arabs wanted to “fight it out at any price”; a sign of “sheer irrationality”. In contradistinction to her image as a democratic theorist, Arendt exhibited an unusual elitism as far the Middle East was concerned. She did not trust the “masses” on either the Arab or Jewish sides. She wanted the United Nations to “summon up the courage” and appeal to “those Jewish and Arab individuals who at present are isolated because of their records as sincere believers in Arab-Jewish cooperation”. She appealed to those few Jews who “have shown in these bitter days i.e. after 1947, when the U.N. resolution on the partition of Palestine was followed by a homicidal campaign by the Arabs against the local Jews – Y.O.] that they have too much wisdom and too great a sense of responsibility to follow blindly where desperate, fanaticized masses would lead them”, and to those “few Arabs who are unhappy about the increasingly fascist coloration of their national movement”, to negotiate a truce. Yet regardless of the responsibility she laid on Arabs for becoming “increasingly fascist”, it is obvious that she saves the
blame for the problems of the Middle East for the Jews. If the Jews were in a precarious position, it must have been because of their own doing.

Arendt linked Zionism with the three main motifs of her “The Origins of Totalitarianism” – anti-Semitism, imperialism and totalitarianism. It should be noted that unlike future critics of Israel, she explicitly stated that “the building of a Jewish National Home was not a colonial enterprise in which Europeans came to exploit foreign riches with the help and at the expense of native labor”. Nonetheless, in her articles from the forties she casts the lot of the State of Israel with that of the collapsing European imperial powers, as a result of the Zionist adherence to the idea of the national-state. “Nationalism is bad enough when it trusts in nothing but the rude force of the nation. A nationalism that necessarily and admittedly depends upon the force of a foreign nation is certainly worse”. But what “foreign nation” was she talking about? The British, who were ruling Palestine at the time, most certainly didn’t help the Jews establish a state. The Americans didn’t either. The only ones who supplied the Jews with weapons were the Soviets, who perceived the Jews to be a bulwark against Western imperialism.

It seems that Arendt was caught in the force of her own rhetoric, and for that reason she was not ashamed to designate this nascent democracy “totalitarian”. In May 1948, just before the proclamation of independence, Arendt described the general atmosphere in Israel as that where “terrorism and the growth of totalitarian methods are silently tolerated and secretly applauded”. Yes, there was terrorism. But there was also persecution of Jewish extremists by the official Zionist bodies. There was also the World Zionist Congress’ condemnation of terrorist methods from 1946 onwards. Arendt’s remarks thus purposefully create a wrong impression. The use of “terrorism” is especially important in Arendt’s distinction between totalitarianism and previous forms of tyranny. Another important difference is that in totalitarian regimes, there is a pervasive sense of seeing everything in terms of all-or-nothing, or us-against-them. In 1948 she described the Jewish populations in both Palestine and the United States as similarly entrapped within their black-or-white view of the world. She describes as them as “essentially in agreement” on the following idea: that “the moment has now come to get everything or nothing, victory or death”.

To make more explicit the totalitarian image of Israel, she often compared the nascent state with the ancient Greek city-state Sparta. The use of this imagery was not uncommon among critics of Zionism. Nor was it uncommon among Germans trained in the philosophical tradition to be using symbols from Ancient Greece. Could Arendt not tell the difference between a democratic republic and a Sparta? More than it exhibits an alarming relapse into demagoguery, it is evidence of a faulty political scientist.

IV.

Arendt accused the Zionist movement of being elitist, completely detached from the East European Jewish “masses”. It is ironic that Arendt does so, because in her “Origins of Totalitarianism”, she does the exact same thing. In “Origins of Totalitarianism” the East European Jews are completely absent. Jews are all portrayed as rich, bourgeois, western European bankers, financiers, and courtiers.

A good illustration of such a self-satisfied Jew would be the founding father of the Zionist movement, Theodore Herzl, whom Arendt describes as being a Jewish “parvenu”, one “who must climb by fraud into a society, a rank, a class, not theirs by birthright”.

“Rather than focus on the real perpetrators of the genocide, Arendt insisted that it were not for these Jewish leaders, the Nazis would not have been able to carry out their plan with such efficiency.”

This category was contrasted with the Jewish “pariah”. Both “parvenu” and “pariah” were the types of Jews that came out of the Jewish Emancipation. The “pariah” on the other hand, was epitomized by the Jewish French anarchist journalist Bernard Lazare. The “pariah” was a revolutionary fighting for the liberation of his people while fighting for the emancipation of humanity in general.

Arendt emphasized that between the two types was an unbridgeable gulf. One was “universalist” in his worldview, the other a “particularist”. Arendt obviously identified more with the “pariah” than with the “parvenu”. She abhorred the Herzl-ian Zionist model. She believed that under Herzl, Zionism betrayed its “revolutionary” destiny. In its stead, she offered her own Zionist model, a “Lazare-ian” one. She explained that whilst for Lazare, “the territorial question was secondary”. Lazare sought “real comrades-in-arms, whom he hoped to find among all the oppressed groups of contemporary Europe”. A Lazare-ian Zionism meant “[organizing] the Jewish people in order to negotiate on the basis of a great revolutionary movement”. Arendt believed that since Lazare quit the Zionist Organization in 1899, “no official Zionist leader dared to side with the revolutionary forces in Europe” (As Walter Laqueur rightly asks: What “great revolutionary movement”? What “revolutionary forces”?)
Arendt saw Zionism as instituted on two lies. The first was anti-Semitism, which Arendt saw as more of a Zionist obsession than a real problem. It was only an excuse, and its existence was overstated by Herzl in order to force a false sense of collective consciousness on the Jewish people. She saw Herzl as being unreasonably obsessed, even though by Herzl’s own time “the anti-Semites he had in view were hardly extant anymore – or if they were, they no longer determined anti-Semitic politics”. Arendt claimed that the Zionist belief that “all Gentiles are anti-Semitic, and everybody and everything is against the Jews” is no more than “plain racist chauvinism”, and “does not differ from other master race theories”.

The second lie concerns the origins of the Jewish people. Arendt expressed opinions that have become commonplace in our time, that the Jews were an essentially European people. Any other claims were, to her, absurd. “Among all the misconceptions harbored by the Zionist movement because it had been influenced so strongly by anti-Semitism, this false notion of the non-European character of the Jews has had probably the most far-reaching and the worst consequences. […] Indeed, the attempts were numerous to interpret Jewish history as the history of an Asiatic people that had been driven by misfortune into a foreign comity of nations and culture wherein, regarded as the eternal stranger, it could never feel at home”. By secluding themselves, the Jews had broken “the necessary solidarity of European peoples”. Yet an astute observer of human affairs as Arendt would surely have noticed that there was no such solidarity. In fact, a few years earlier, the “European peoples” went to war, proving how much solidarity they felt with one another. Was Arendt blaming the Jews for that?

Arendt’s casting of the Jews as a European people may have had to do with her own personal discomfort, as noted earlier. But it is unfortunate that Arendt let her personal feelings get in the way of proper scholarship. She even did so with her reports on the Eichmann Trial, where it seems that her distaste for the Israelis pushed her towards extreme misrepresentations of what had happened during the Holocaust.

The resulting book, “Eichmann in Jerusalem”, raised two important claims. The first is regarding the role of the Judenräte, the Jews that were selected by the Nazis to serve as “local leaders”. Rather than focus on the real perpetrators of the genocide, Arendt insisted that were it not for these Jewish leaders, the Nazis would not have been able to carry out their plan with such efficiency. But why dedicate so much of her thesis to this question? What does this have to do with Eichmann’s guilt? Was she suggesting the Jews were responsible for their own extermination?

Arendt seems to have come to Israel with the intention of exonerating Eichmann, and putting the Israeli establishment on trial. This leads to her second claim, which was more “philosophical”. Arendt claimed that Eichmann was no more than a simple bureaucrat who carefully filled the orders he was given, and was therefore undeserving of the Israeli characterization of him as a monster. It appears that for Arendt, the true criminals were the Jewish community leaders and the Zionists. If it were not for them, Eichmann could not have executed his plans with such effectiveness. Thus Arendt’s rendition of the Holocaust led to a sort of “role-reversal”. The victims were suddenly the perpetrators, and the perpetrators were the victims.

But Eichmann was not “banal” at all. Eichmann’s greatest crime, the murder of tens of thousands of Hungarian Jews, was committed in direct disobedience of his commander – Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS. This fact alone shows that Eichmann was fully aware of what he was doing, and was not merely obeying orders. This episode happened during the last days of the Thousand Year Reich, when evidence of the Jews’ annihilation had to be hidden away. Eichmann ignored the directive, and averted the resources to committing more atrocities. As Israeli historian Elchanan Yekira points out, this fact is missing from Arendt’s reports.

V.

As can be gathered, it thus becomes very problematic for Israelis to look up to Arendt as a spiritual leader at this time of crisis. Unsurprisingly, the majority of the people involved in publishing her works in Israel consider themselves to belong to the intellectual current known as “post-Zionism”, which openly avows a commitment to the “dismantling” of Israel.”
national” ideologies in other parts of the world. Post-nationalist ideologies support values that are considered “universalistic” in nature. They seek to undermine the nation-state as the fundamental political unit of sovereignty and the international order. In the name of “freedom from repression” and “multiculturalism”, post-nationalists strive towards the construction of a new world order based on international, non-governmental organizations, that will be free from the tyranny and national chauvinism supposedly espoused by the current nation-state system. Post-nationalists’ empathy is often to be found with minorities or “small nations”, against larger, well-established states.

Post-Zionists accepted the tenets of post-nationalism and applied them to the Middle East conflict. The basis of their ideological struggle is not the establishment of an independent Palestinian State, but rather the dismantlement of the existing one in the name of “universalist” principles. Unlike other post-national ideologies, post-Zionism boasts openly of a combative dogma intended to destroy the State of Israel as it now exists. Uri Ram, a sociologist at Ben-Gurion University in Israel, largely recognized as one of post-Zionism’s founding fathers, defined post-Zionism as a “political-cultural project [that entails] an ideal and political struggle to change the Israeli collectivist identity”. And à la guerre comme à la guerre, post-Zionists have resorted to the use of “weapons”. One such weapon is the “enlisting” of the Holocaust in the name of Palestinian rights. Post-Zionism sees the Palestinian struggle for independence as part of the general Third World Awakening during the mid-twentieth century. The only reason Palestinian statehood did not come about was because of the Holocaust, which disrupted the natural decolonization process. Post-Zionists therefore continuously belittle the importance of the Holocaust. In addition, post-Zionists “imported” into Israel the “imagined communities” discourse made fashionable in the last few decades. They claim that there was no Jewish People as such, and therefore the historical connection to the Land of Israel is a mere imperialistic excuse. Undoubtedly, the original 19th century Zionist Movement shared many traits in common with other European national movements of the era. But to say that the Jewish People did not exist beforehand? Centuries of anti-Semitic propaganda will easily refute such a claim. The very etymology of “Jew” – one from Judea – should prompt some reflection. For centuries the Semitic origin of the Jews was not doubted. Narratives claiming the European origins of Jews only emerged within the past century, by anti-Zionists such as Arthur Koestler, Hannah Arendt, and recently Israeli historian Shlomo Zand. One however must note the irony of how within a hundred years, anti-Semitic discourse changed from the battle-cry “Jews go back to Palestine!” to “Jews get out of Palestine!”

Thus it is easy to see why in an intellectual battle such as this, one of the post-Zionists’ weapon of choice in recent years is Hannah Arendt. They must see in her an early forerunner of many of their own claims. In Arendt’s book on Eichmann, the shift of focus from the Nazi genocide to Jewish accountability serves exactly the purpose of belittling the Holocaust. In Arendt’s claims about the Jews’ European origins they find justification for claiming that Jews are an “imagined community”. In Arendt’s “universalist” ethic, post-Zionists find support for their own anarchistic ideology. But above all, her hostility to Zionism made Arendt a welcome member of the club, regardless of the real merit of her opinions. An evaluation of those opinions, however, is clearly necessary, especially by Israelis.

Naturally, the publication of Arendt’s writings in Hebrew is not a problem in itself. Diversity of opinion is welcome. The problem is that in Israel there have been very few voices who have taken up challenging Arendt’s opinions. This is the mark of a crisis, of a democracy that is unable to defend itself. And it is unfortunate, because as far as Arendt is concerned, there is plenty to criticize. Apart from her bizarre suggestion that the Jews and Arabs emulate the Soviet Union, we must ask ourselves why her ideas about Zionism fare any better than the ones that were adopted in practice. The State of Israel has existed now for nearly seven decades, and it managed to turn a nation of refugees into a member of the family of nations (admittedly, a family that has not always been keen on accepting her). Despite all the woes – and there have been plentiful – one would be pressed to find someone claiming that the lot of the Jews had actually worsened in the past century. Some may claim that Jewish sovereignty could only be achieved whilst suppressing others’ national aspirations. Perhaps. But one should also ask, why are the Jews any less deserving of a state than any other group?

To combat the current crisis, perhaps it would be better to turn away from the “universalist” discourse, and return to the original texts that inspired the Jews to end the two thousand years exile. “Universalism” may not necessarily bring about the unmitigated blessing that its supporters claim for it. And this should be an argument taken up not merely with post-Zionists, but in our discussion of Arendt herself.

To prove this point, let us look once again at Arendt’s proposal to adopt a Zionism based on the ideas of Bernard Lazare, rather than Theodore Herzl’s. To the latter there exists a monument in the shape of a state that has consistently defended its people from experiencing another Holocaust. To the former there was erected a public square in Paris in 2005. And in such a light, in essence, is how we should view Arendt’s remarks.
The Feminine Mistake
How We Changed our Bodies to Fit the Market

By Lauren Butler Bergier

I. Two Major Changes in the Life of the Species

Something drastic changed in the life of our species during the twentieth century, at least throughout the developed world. Female human beings, before our era, more or less reliably experienced fertile periods of approximately five-to-seven days per lunar month from puberty to menopause, with the exception of the nine-month gestational period before a birth. There was once a great deal of variation among women as to how conscious they were of when exactly those five-to-seven fertile days occurred, which led many to characterize the female of the species as ‘always available’, reproductively speaking. Now, most women in developed countries have access to a pill that gives them a certain degree of control over which fertile periods occur and which do not. This drug was developed in response to demand for more control over fertility—something human beings had probably dreamed of for a long time—and has had breathtaking commercial success. For many, it has liberated female desire from the reproductive guessing game—is this just lovemaking, or will I be left with a child?—and in any case, it has created the new most common form of sex, in which one partner is chemically altered to remove the reproductive possibility.

The second major development in the life of the species in the developed world during the twentieth century was the legalization of abortion in most Western countries, which both came from and reinforced the claim that inducing or simulating a miscarriage was an acceptable reaction to the coming birth of a child.

In any case, the Pill supplied a demand in the market, the demand for certainty that sex would be child-free, and legal abortion came out of the previously existing attitude that it would be merciful to allow women to choose a safe end to an unwanted pregnancy. Both events concretely changed the biological futures of women in the parts of the world in which they occurred. Both were in response to a perceived lack. But what was perceived to be lacking in the natural situation? Was the problem really with women’s nature, or did women’s nature become unbearable due to societal changes? The natural situation certainly caused great feminine distress. Pregnancy, for one, can be highly unpleasant; giving birth almost always is, aside from the very end, assuming one is awake enough and pain-inhibited enough to be able to appreciate the baby. Motherhood also has its disagreeable moments, but the vast majority of mothers—and this is true before and after the change—describe motherhood as the single most important, most fulfilling thing they have done in their lives. Are the material and social changes that pregnancy and motherhood now bring the real culprits, the real causes behind the demand for changing nature?

I will confine myself to speaking about our era; it seems to me that in our society, in recent memory, women found themselves in a situation so unpleasant that a technological solution, which would fundamentally alter the biology of the species, was sought and found. Our solution was not to prevent the unwanted material and social consequences caused by some pregnancies; we instead prevented, or ended, the pregnancies themselves, using new technology and laws. I think that this came about in part because many people believed the problem really was biological, and that the best solution was not to change society to accommodate all pregnancies or to prevent “undesirable” pregnancies using natural means, but to alter women’s nature once and for all, in its most basic sense of biological destiny.

II. Making Women into Individual Economic Units

So we instead attempted to overcome part of women’s nature: the relationship between the female body and childbearing. This coincided with what was arguably an acceleration in the long-term trend of thinking of human...
Counterpoint

the Pill supplied a demand in the market, the demand for certainty that sex would be child-free, and legal abortion came out of the previously existing attitude that it would be merciful to allow women to choose a safe end to an unwanted pregnancy. Both events concretely changed the biological futures of women in the parts of the world in which they occurred. Both were in response to a perceived lack. But what was perceived to be lacking in the natural situation?”

With this, of course, has come the disappearance of most middle and upper class women from the home—Julia Child, today, might simply open up her own world-renowned restaurant, rather than addressing herself to the audience of millions of French and American housewives, ready to study all the complexities of kitchen chemistry, engineering, and art. Before, these women raised groups of siblings at home, teaching them one-on-one or in small groups for the first years of their lives. Perhaps most significantly, they, unlike today’s schoolteachers and childcare workers, were “allowed” to hug and kiss their small children. Their daughters and granddaughters are all engaged in highly useful and rewarding activities, like politics, diplomacy, medicine, law, education, and consulting, and their children spend their days at school as early as the age of 2—the age most babies begin to speak. Now, children are raised in large groups with caretakers who are neither naturally predisposed nor even legally allowed to cover them with kisses. Should we be astonished that the emotional development of middle class children has taken a hit since most middle class women have left the home? Should we be surprised that the overall complexity of many languages has likewise radically declined? I am sure you can think of many other aspects of culture that have changed for the worse since women throughout the social classes have begun doing more or less what men do. Just look at what we eat, what we say to each other, how we spend our leisure time, how we clothe ourselves, and how we date.
III. Defending Women’s Bodies

This is not to say that the benefits of women being able to work outside the home do not matter; on the contrary, I, for one, am grateful to have the option! But I also resent the pressure to conform to the current economic model even to the extent of using technological means to modify what my body naturally does. And whether we like it or not, even in the age of “reproductive choices,” the scope of our individual choices is highly limited, even determined, by the sum total of the choices of all the individuals in our society. If it is not possible to raise a family with a certain standard of living—say, where everyone in the family has health insurance—on a single salary, nowadays, most women will choose to provide the second salary and put the kids in daycare and after-school programs, all while limiting family size.

I do, however, think that there are still some things we could do to change these disturbing trends. The first solution is a kind of civil disobedience: get off the Pill and allow women’s bodies to throw a curveball once more in the self-preservation-based economic calculations. This would mean, even when natural family planning is practiced, that the female body would no longer be altered to the extent that the possibility of pregnancy is not even thought about for years at a time. Second, support pregnant women in difficulty, so that they may choose not to end their pregnancies out of fear of material and social consequences. Third, vote for “family-friendly” domestic policies—childcare tax credits, for instance, that can be applied to time spent at home by children’s own mothers; laws limiting the kind of usury that fuels the need for every family to have two salaries. And while we’re at it, we could support research into women’s health that seeks to understand, rather than to alter, the natural functioning of the female body. Is it not symptomatic of our societies’ contempt for women’s bodies that aberrations in the menstrual cycle, hormonal variations, and even causes of infertility remain mysteries to modern medicine?

Lastly, when judging foreign policy, and in your personal giving, look for development programs that raise the standard of living without changing women to fit the economic model through contraception and abortion. Access to clean water, for instance, should be one of our highest priorities—not access to birth control.

My hope is that by becoming aware of what really happened to women in the twentieth century, we can force the world economy to accommodate women’s biology rather than altering women’s biology to accommodate the world economy. 🌍
One of the centerpieces of President Obama’s foreign policy was the creation and ratification of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) with Russia. Much has been written about what a poor treaty it is: it is a de facto American nuclear disarmament, it provides a barrier to further American development of missile defense systems, and limits America’s flexibility to respond to global disruptions. However, these are all symptoms of a much larger issue in the Obama administration. The START Treaty, and the rhetoric surrounding it, especially when placed in the context of the 2010 National Security Strategy put forth by the White House, exposes an administration whose dedication to internationalism is clouding its ability to adequately assess America’s security interests.

This may be a loaded statement; however, there is no other way of interpreting the administration’s action during the debate over START. The administration, and its allies in Congress, pushed for ratification of the treaty in the lame duck session. It is a fair question to ask why a piece of legislation that would significantly affect American power and whose wisdom was repeatedly questioned by many knowledgeable individuals, such as Ambassador John Bolton, would be rushed through the Senate on a last minute vote. Did not such a bill not deserve a much larger debate, with potentially controversial and disadvantageous language stricken, such as modifying the sections dealing with MIRV’s and missile defense? That is what common sense would dictate. There are those who would argue that such a move was a practical concern by the Democrats: knowing that the treaty would die in the new Congress. This was, no doubt, a driving force behind the rush. However, what truly motivated President

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Obama was much more than politics. For President Obama, START was a necessity, not because of some contextual security reason, but because it conformed to President Obama’s vision of an international America; a nation that, as he put in his 2010 National Security Strategy, strengthens “international standards and institutions” like the UN. Thus, the president classifies actions into one of two categories: those that promote the international character of the US, which are good, and those that do not, which are bad.

The language the president uses as he discusses torture provides such an example. In the 2010 National Security Strategy, the President categorically condemned the use of torture. There are many arguments for and against torture with regards to its merits as an information-gathering tool, and the brief mentions the cons. However, before these arguments, which do present a security oriented rational for ending torture, the brief condemns it as “alienating the US from the rest of the world.” This is not the only example. Only in the vaguest terms and with reference to international cooperation does the brief address matters of US force size and modernization or the ability of the US to, if necessary, unilaterally protects its interests abroad. In short, the brief reduces matters of national security to questions of internationalism.

Ultimately, the most important lesson to take away from President Obama’s actions regarding START is that he is going to conduct foreign policy, and especially defense policy, completely through the lens of his internationalist ideology. Foreign policy should not be about dogma, rather, it should be about looking at the circumstances and determining what actions are necessary to preserve American interest, without regard to the conformity of such action to preconceived ideology. There is nothing worse than a committed ideologue running foreign policy, for in his sincerity and good intentions—and one should not doubt either President Obama’s sincerity or his belief that internationalism is good—he will be blind to the negative impacts of his decisions.

HEALTH CARE

By Jeremy Rozansky

What can be said about the new health-care law that has not already been said? The bill will, barring a major calamity, define two election cycles. It has taken more of the President’s political capital than anything else and it promises to be the enduring legacy of his presidency.

Although Barack Obama signed his name to the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, it was neither a proposal he ran on nor a policy he designed. The task of drafting the law was strangely delegated to House and Senate leadership, a group to the left of the caucus as a whole. Still, PPACA has appropriately come to be known as “Obamacare,” since he could have pushed for something different or even vetoed this final project.

When it comes to the American healthcare system there are really two major schools of thought, and they happen to correspond neatly to our partisan system. Medical care policy, everyone admits, has three possible concerns: access to care, cost of care, and quality of care. One side of the debate, the liberal side, puts the primary focus on access, based on a fundamental belief in equality or, perhaps, a right to healthcare. They see a healthcare system in which profit-motivated insurers deny coverage to the destitute or the impoverished and they seek to use government to contain the unfortunate consequences of the profit-motive. On the other side, there is no primary emphasis. The conservatives see the healthcare system as a counterintuitive, flawed system for the distribution of any goods—an average family receives medical care from a provider who coordinates with an insurer who is chosen by an employer—that does not harness the ability of the profit-motivated market to lower costs and thereby improve healthcare access and encourage innovation. One side believes a new layer of government regulation and subsidy are required to alleviate the problem; the other side believes government needs to revise the existing regulations in order to change the market. These are two mutually exclusive visions without much in the way of middle ground.

Many complaints about Obamacare have come about the size of the bill (roughly 2,000 pages). This might be a cheap shot except insofar as it reveals the conceit of the new law: that well-studied technocrats can manage something as complicated as how millions of Americans receive highly prioritized and personal services. The

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law is a network of incentives to mandate insurance and encourage the use of preventive medical care. Aspects of the bill might violate cherished liberties, even constitutionally protected liberties, but more important, perhaps, is the lack of humility in governance that the law reveals. The law is a complicated, convoluted system that tries to subvert emotionally rich decisions by the most bewildering creatures on the planet: American citizens. That, and it’s going to cost a lot of money.

The theory behind the law begins with the people who are excluded from health care insurance because insurers are wary of pre-existing conditions. Someone who has a pre-existing condition and is nearly certain to land high medical bills for the insurance agency will only be included by the insurer if they pay a steep premium. This law regulates insurance companies, prohibiting the denial of insurance based on pre-existing conditions and passing on the extra costs to those already insured. To prevent people from waiting until they have an illness or accident to purchase insurance, the law contains two mandates to be included in an insurance plan: an individual and an employer.

The individual mandate works as follows: if a family of four making over $25,000 a year refuses to buy health insurance, they will be fined $2,000. There are hardship exemptions but the fines are mostly examples of what is called “regressive incidence.” The fines are disproportionately leveled on the poor, as individuals who will be affected tend to be without a job or in a law-paying job. There is also an employer mandate for all employers with 50 employees or more. Because of a historical accident of wage controls during the FDR Administration, most Americans still get health insurance from their employer. Any business that does not cover just one worker will be taxed $2000 per worker (excluding the first thirty), including workers who are covered. This will especially harm businesses that employ a number of low-skill, low-income workers. Other businesses might find that the fine is much smaller than the cost of insuring and could drop their coverage completely. This is especially exasperated by another provision of the law—the removal of caps on insurance benefits that help keep costs low for employers. The Department of Health and Human Services has already issued over two-hundred waivers that exempt companies and unions from the removal of insurance benefit caps after it was revealed that the hike in premium costs could cause the companies to drop their employees. This amounts to governance not by clear and predictable laws and rules but by an authority’s whim—this is always the step after convoluted laws backfire.

For those who are not covered by an employer and choose to purchase health insurance (whether under penalty of fine or not), two broad types of government assistance are available. About half fit into the category of those eligible for Medicaid (incomes below 133% of the poverty line). Many of these people already qualify for Medicaid, which is a state-run program that receives federal funds. Under Obamacare, the Federal Government will eventually pay about 90% of the costs for the newly eligible individuals, meaning that states already in fiscal crisis will have to pay 10% of the medical costs for people they were not previously paying for. The oncoming state insolvency will only come quicker. The other half of the newly insured are put into exchanges, markets where government approval is the only barrier to entry and individuals are given a subsidy to buy health insurance. Those households with incomes between 133% and 400% of the Federal Poverty Line (between about $29,000 and $88,000 today) must pay a progressively increasing percentage of their income toward health insurance (up to 9.5%). The federal government will then pay for the remaining cost of insurance in the exchanges. These costs will exceed projections if firms continue to drop workers into the exchanges.

The program is paid for through new taxes, including increases in the Medicare tax, the fines and fees to individuals and businesses, and cuts to Medicare. The cuts are of four types. First, the federal government will lower payment rates for services, meaning far fewer providers will be willing to take Medicare patients. Official Medicare actuaries have estimated that 15% of hospitals will go out of business in the next decade because of these cuts. These typically have not worked to lower the total costs of Medicare upward as the volume of care increases with an aging population. Second, the law creates the Independent Payment Advisory Board which is authorized to make further cuts to Medicare without Congressional approval. Third, Obamacare authorizes many pilot programs to experiment with new payment models. Fourth, the law cuts Medicare Advantage, a voucher program in which seniors can purchase private

Counterpoint
insurance. Many of the existing private plans would not be able to withstand the cuts to Medicare Advantage and seniors would have to switch plans. These decreases will be offset slightly by measures that increase Medicare costs by, for example, mandating preventive care and also removing existing incentives to buy generic prescription drugs.

Most of the financing of the bill rests on two assumptions: the Medicare cuts will be implemented wholly and effectively and the number of people using exchanges will be about 19 million. Of course, the impact of the across-the-board cut in Medicare will be supplemented through the annual passing of the “doc-fix” which offsets some of the payment reductions to healthcare providers. This was originally part of the bill but was excluded so that the Congressional Budget Office’s scoring mechanism would show no addition to the deficit. Moreover, the figure of 19 million enrollees in the exchange program assumes that businesses would not be dropping employees at the rate they have been. (Former CBO chief, Douglas Holtz-Eakin estimates 35 million could be dropped by their employers.) This, combined with promised tax increases such as the ones on “Cadillac” health insurance plans that are likely to never materialize as well as promised cuts that are also likely never to materialize, suggests that one should bet on Obamacare adding to the deficit.

What we have then, is a strange and convoluted new entitlement, sure to expedite the march toward American default. It not only preserves a terribly inefficient system, it makes it more obtuse and then subsidizes it. The Republican Party has rightly made the replacement of Obamacare its primary legislative goal. A replacement should begin by targeting the way people buy insurance. There is no reason for medical care consumers to have their insurance purchased by a third party (their employer). Moreover, there is no reason why the insurance model of payment is predominant. Insurance is for protection against terrible scenarios, not for predictable expenses. No car insurance covers an oil change. Because the insurance model minimizes per-treatment expenditures, price is hidden from the consumer, and he therefore over-consumes at higher prices. If individuals had a choice of health coverage arrangements as opposed to being funneled into an insurance plan by an employer or the government, many would be attracted to the more cost-effective combination of Health Savings Accounts (tax-deductible account to pay for predictable expenses) and catastrophic insurance (to pay for expensive, unpredictable treatments). The plan that best provides the market-model that encourages cost-effectiveness and maintains a concern for equity is the defined contribution model proposed by Tom Miller of the American Enterprise Institute and James C. Capretta of the Ethics and Public Policy Center. There are also more cost-effective ways to deal with the problem of the exclusion of those with pre-existing conditions, such as high-risk pools.

Errors, even in governance, can be corrected. Obamacare set up a system that entrenches the existing problems in health care and does not provide requisite consumer choice. The law went the direction of greater government involvement in the distribution of medical care. In fact, it needed to go the other direction and clear away a number of the existing government-induced convolutions. The layers of government in healthcare should be rolled away and simplified, even going past the point at which Obamacare is repealed. It was the wrong vision; it was the wrong law.

ABORTION/STEM-CELLS

By Tom Palmer

President Obama was elected as a moderate; he presented himself as fiscally and socially center-left, even promising a net spending cut. But there is one area in which Obama has never presented himself as anything but unmoderated: abortion and bioethics policy.

The president believes firmly not only (as with most pro-choice advocates) that abortion is an evil outweighed by countervailing goods like female autonomy, but that abortion is in fact morally neutral. Thus, on the campaign trail, he was careful to speak only of his desire to reduce unwanted pregnancies. He never repeated the traditional Democratic mantra of “safe, legal, and rare” because to declare that abortion ought to be “rare” would imply that it is something other than a routine medical procedure.

The Obama administration has not delivered on most of its promises. The one set of promises on

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which the Nobel Peace Prize winner has delivered are his most divisive: his promises regarding abortion policy. Granted, presidents are limited in the steps they can take to further the abortion license in a country in which the Supreme Court has already decreed that license to be unlimited. President Obama has already taken every step available to him. He has appointed two stalwartly pro-abortion Supreme Court justices, Sonia Sotomayor and, more disturbingly, Elena Kagan, whose interference (while in the employ of the federal government) in the expert amicus briefs filed by doctors in *Casey vs. Planned Parenthood* helped ensure the continuation and strengthening of Roe’s ban on abortion-limiting legislation.

He has also appointed pro-abortion judges to the Federal Courts of Appeals—including a judge whose pro-abortion activism made him a laughingstock in the federal judiciary. “For seven years,” wrote renowned appellate Judge Frank Easterbrook in 2002, “Indiana has been prevented from enforcing a statute materially identical to a law held valid by the Supreme Court in *Casey*, by this court in *Karlin*, and by the Fifth Circuit in *Barnes*. No court anywhere in the country (other than one district judge in Indiana) has held any similar law invalid.”

The lawless culprit? Obama’s 2009 nominee to the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals, Judge David Hamilton. Judge Hamilton now sits on the appellate court which held that he had engaged in a truly unprecedented abuse of discretion in the cause of counteracting Indiana’s limited intrusions on the abortion license—intrusions that had been approved even by pro-abortion Justices Kennedy, O’Connor, and Souter.

President Obama has taken steps to maximize the federal funding of abortion abroad, as in the Mexico City policy. He has of course also taken steps towards the federal funding of abortions domestically, in which case he would be the first President ever to oversee the circumvention of the Hyde Amendment.

While political realities have forced the president to downplay his abortion policies—in his muted statement on this year’s Roe anniversary, he declined to even utter the word “abortion”—those realities permitted him to celebrate his decision to roll back the Bush compromise, which allowed federal funding of embryonic stem cell research while declining to pay for the destruction of new embryos. There are other less salient areas of bioethics. The public supports stem cell research without nuance, thanks to a systematic campaign by Democrats and interest groups to conflate embryo-destructive and other forms of stem cell research. But since the public opposes cloning, he “banned” federal funding of human cloning—in appearance. The president in fact banned cloning only for *reproductive* purposes. That is, funding of cloning is impermissible unless it is done with the intention of destroying the clone for the purposes of medical research. The president’s policy is, in practice, a ban on not killing whatever human clones researchers choose to create.

President Obama also decided to replace the morally serious and ideologically diverse President’s Council on Bioethics with a new panel of scientists whose mandate was not to determine the proper ends and means of science, but to deal with means and largely bury bioethical debates. It is, of course, impossible to formulate a bioethics policy with no ends in mind. Those ends are now simply subjected to less scrutiny. Given the unpopularity of the ends favored by the president and the fringe supporters of his bioethics policies, it is perhaps an understandable move.

The Obama presidency has, in many ways, been a wonderful thing for the country. The election of the first black president is a truly great symbol of how this nation can overcome its greatest sins. It is a testament to the potential for democracy to right wrongs. How tragic, then, that President Obama’s tenure so far has also been such a failure of American democracy. While a sizeable majority of Americans supports permitting abortion only in cases of incest, rape, or danger to a mother’s life, President Obama has moved abortion policy from where it stood—far, far to the left of the American consensus—to an even further fringe, not merely permitting but sanctioning and funding the deliberate killing of human beings. Most tragic of all, he has been given two chances, and may yet have more, to perpetuate the Roe regime through the appointment of Supreme Court Justices unwilling to accept the proposition that all human life deserves protection. The great triumph of American civil rights may have set the greatest civil rights cause of our day back another forty years.

President Obama delivers the commencement address at Notre Dame University.
As we are often reminded, President Obama is our first African American president. As he has often reminded us, he was going to transcend simple racial categories to establish the first post-racial presidency. While the veracity of the first claim is hardly in doubt, the facts pertaining to the state of “race” within the Obama Administration hardly lead one to the conclusion that it is in fact post-racial, but rather that this administration has taken an intense interest in questions of race and unequal treatment in American society.

To understand the Obama administration position on race, three pertinent observations must be made: one, the Obama administration often pays extraordinary rhetorical interest in moving beyond race while at the same time, failing to do so. Two, the tenured civil service, now unmoored from the restrictions of the Bush administration, is acting more than ever on the question of race, in ways that are neither democratically responsive, nor intellectually receptive to outside ideas. Finally, the ways in which the president and his higher-level political appointees deal with the question of race show a distinct interest in demonstrating a strong position on racial issues, especially between blacks and whites.

First and foremost, the entire logic of the Obama administration’s position on race is built on two contradictory yet omnipresent premises: as a nation, we need to “transcend the topic of race,” and, at the same time, discrimination against African-Americans is systemic, inherent, and terrible, and therefore it is the job of the executive branch to remedy this social malady. So the rhetoric of the Obama administration focuses on healing racial scars and “reaching out for unity,” while the administrative apparatus operates from the assumption, so helpfully verbalized by Attorney General Eric Holder, that when it comes to race we are essentially “a nation of cowards,” unwilling to properly remedy past wrongs.

Consider the actions taken by the Obama administration over what has been called the “New Black Panthers Case.” The Black Panthers case focuses on an incident during the 2008 Presidential election in which two men, King Samir Shabazz and Jerry Jackson who are both prominent members of the radical racist group, stood outside a Philadelphia polling booth holding nightsticks claiming to be “providing security.” Immediately, accusations of voter intimidation swirled, particularly when a video of the duo was posted to Youtube, in which King Samir Shabazz, while holding his nightstick, yells racial epithets at nearby white voters. Such action is clearly outlawed in the Voting Rights Act of 1965, an act designed to keep the Bull Connors of the world at bay and allow for the safe participation of all in the most crucial of democratic activities.

Should this not have been an open-and-shut case of voter intimidation? Not according to the Department of Justice. According to J. Christian Adams and Christopher Coats, career DOJ attorneys put in charge of prosecuting the case, DOJ really had very little intention of litigating the case from the beginning. In the words of Christopher Coats: “I had people who told me point-blank that [they] didn’t come to the voting rights section to sue African American people.” Adams testified to the US Commission on Civil Rights that he was “told by voting section management that cases are not going to be brought against black defendants on [behalf] of white victims.”

Both Coats and Adams resigned over what they considered to be a horrendous failure of justice in the Obama administration. Furthermore, when the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights began to investigate the Obama administration’s handling of the case, Department of Justice officials began to stonewall the Commission, doing their best to keep the Commission in the dark. Granted, the particulars of the New Black Panthers Case are rather unimportant and the general effects from the case will not be widely felt, but it is rather what the case implies that is significant here. The Black Panthers case, more than anything else, signifies the lengths to which the Obama administration has allowed the civil service, the part tasked by political appointees to prosecute cases, to act in a completely unmoored way. Consistently, the Obama administration’s approach to issues of a racial tenor has been to defer when the victims are white, and to aggressively pursue when the victims are black.

This incident was far from an isolated one. Consider the absence of prosecution on voter fraud cases, highlighted by the demasking of the fraudulent behavior of ACORN employees last year. The Motor Voter Fraud investigation in Missouri was hardly pursued at all by the
Obama administration. The allegations that people were being left on the Motor Voter registrations long after death were ignored by the Department of Justice on the grounds that it was not an important case at all, and that “voter fraud is not a serious issue.” According to Adams, the official position of the Office of Civil Rights in the Justice Department, and Deputy Assistant Attorney General Julie Fernandes in particular, was that any enforcement of Section 8 of the federal “Motor Voter” law, requiring states to regularly purge their voter rolls of dead people, felons, illegal voters and those who have moved out of state was simply not of any importance. Adams quotes Fernandes as saying, “We’re not interested in those kind of cases. What do they have to do with helping increase minority access and turnout? We want to increase access to the ballot, not limit it.”

Furthermore, when called to testify in front of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights about this issue, the Justice Department flat-out refused, furthering suspicions that the “most transparent administration ever” is covering something up. But simply not prosecuting certain transgressions is far from the only offense against civil rights the Obama administration has perpetrated. Just as egregious are the cases it has chosen to pursue, particularly ones dealing with the same Voting Rights Act that they chose not to enforce when it came to the Black Panthers Case.

One of the more controversial elements of the Voting Rights Act is Section 5, in which districts deemed to have a problematic racial history—as of over 40 years ago—need to petition the federal government if they are going to change any laws related to voting or voter registration. When the city of Kinston, North Carolina, a majority African-American town, passed a ballot initiative in 2008 changing city council elections from partisan to non-partisan, the Department of Justice refused to authorize this change, using Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act.

The reason the Justice Department refused to allow the change? They worried that voters in a non-partisan election would not choose the “right” candidates, and, since the city of Kinston is overwhelmingly Democratic, one can only conclude that politics was the primary motivation for this bizarrely patronizing act of political subjugation. One merely has to peel back the layers of odd and disingenuous assumptions built into this decision to truly understand what the Justice Department thinks it is doing. The soft bigotry of low expectations indeed!

The final incident I wish to highlight is something that has not garnered nearly as much press as any of the other incidents I have described, the Office of Civil Rights interest in pursuing claims of “disparate discipline” in public schools throughout the nation. “Disparate Discipline” takes the already dubious logic of disparate impact—a provision of Title VII claiming that different levels of impact of a policy can be, in and of themselves, evidence of discrimination against adversely affected parties—and applies them to high school disciplinary policy. Thomas Perez, the Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights in the Department of Justice, said, “[S] tudents of color are receiving different and harsher disciplinary punishments than whites for the same or similar infractions, and they are disproportionately impacted by zero-tolerance policies—a fact that only serves to exacerbate already deeply entrenched disparities in many communities,” establishing the need for federal intervention.

The only evidence produced for disparate discipline so far is the commonly acknowledged difference in disciplinary actions for blacks over any other race. They have yet to produce any evidence that this is not merely a result of different rates of offense, or because African-American students tend to attend schools with harsher disciplinary policies, but instead have assumed that such a difference necessarily stems from racism. The idea that we would need to federalize school discipline over such shoddy claims highlights the general approach this administration has taken towards racial politics in America.

This approach to race belies a presidency built on the promising language of racial transcendence. When viewed in conjunction with other public absurdities, like the “Beer Summit” between Obama, Henry Louis Gates (an African-American Harvard professor) and the police officer who wrongly arrested him, it becomes clear that Obama’s language on race and his intentions are fundamentally separate deals. It is impossible to be the “post-racial” president if race is an inexorable part of the way your administration does business. Nor can we hope to get beyond issues relating to “the color of our skin” if we see racial bogeymen around every corner.
DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL
By Taylor Brogan

The recent repeal of the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy has largely been applauded by the news media, center-right to far-left adults, and nearly everyone else under the age of twenty-five. It has been branded as a “major victory for Obama,” and President Obama himself said, “sacrifice, valor and integrity are no more defined by sexual orientation than they are by race or gender, religion or creed.”

I agree with Obama—qualities like sacrifice, valor, and integrity have absolutely nothing to do with sexual orientation. That is precisely why Don't Ask Don't Tell was the ideal policy. It did not prohibit homosexual people from serving in the military; rather it removed sexual orientation from the equation entirely. By repealing DADT, the senate has effectively turned sexuality into a bigger issue for the military than it needs to be.

Many have argued that it does not matter whether gays serving in the military reveal their orientation or not, and to a certain extent, this is a valid point. Outside of combat, it really would not matter whether you or any of your fellow comrades were openly gay. However, the subject of unit cohesion becomes the tipping point on the repeal-or-not scale, especially with regards to maximized lethality and survivability in combat units.

Preventing gay men from revealing their sexual orientation is the same as preventing women from serving in the front lines of combat; it’s not about rights, it’s about unit cohesion. If two members of the same unit were romantically involved with one another, that could pose a serious threat to the completion of the mission. Indeed, the military study conducted in light of DADT found that the majority of soldiers who opposed the repeal were combatants. The ugly truth about the military is that the primary objective in most missions is to kill the enemy; saving your fellow combatants takes a backseat to that objective. By adding transparency to sexuality, the opportunity for relationships to come into being within units is increased tremendously, and the implications of that cannot be ignored or written off as homophobic fear-mongering.

Again, it’s not about rights; it’s about practical and effective policy-making within the military. I believe that it would be an absolute travesty if we prevented gay people from serving in the military. If you are willing to lay down your life for your country, and if you are able, then you deserve nothing but the support and respect of your fellow citizens. Don't Ask Don't Tell allowed for a situation in which sexual orientation was a non-issue. By repealing it, the senate has effectively opened up a potentially very dangerous can of worms.

FREE TRADE
By Alastair Cleve

During his presidential campaign, President Obama emphasized his free-trade credentials. He made it clear that he would support free trade, resisting pressure from groups recommending protectionist “remedies” for national economic lethargy. He emphasized that he is a man of vision and values: that he believes in decency, free trade, and market-based solutions. He impressed much of the country when he proposed performance-related pay as a measure to incentivize improvement in public education, thereby becoming the first Democrat since Roosevelt to challenge the hegemony of teachers’ unions. Barack Obama seemed intelligent, pragmatic, and independent enough to lead the country through a dreadful financial crisis without creating a system of perverse incentives or acquiescing to unions and trade groups. Despite this, however, his government produced tremendously expensive pieces of legislation such as the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and the Car

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Allowance Rebate System—i.e. cash for clunkers. And on September 11, 2009, President Obama almost ignited a trade war with China by signing into law tariffs of 35% on imported Chinese tires. The United Steelworkers union had complained that the increasing flow of imports from China was creating competition and forcing factory workers out of work. Wanting to be seen as a leader for the downtrodden and jobless, the President quickly sacrificed his principles on the altar of populism. Not only was he saving jobs, the President was protecting Americans from that terrible evil: the choice of buying tires at a lower price.

Presidents in a democratic society are especially prone to populism. Former Presidents Reagan, Clinton, and both Bushs succumbed to protectionist pressure. Pundits like Lou Dobbs perpetuate the insidious myth of a rising China determined to steal all of our jobs. This tragedy of populism is that it often leads to unintended consequences.

A myth has been created that we can reduce our imports but increase our exports: that we can have a German-led growth model, whereby we sell everything from textiles to pharmaceuticals to an eager world yet import very little for ourselves. The problem of this thinking lies in currency exchange markets, which exist so that individuals may trade currencies with the ultimate end of purchasing goods and services in the home of the respective currency. If we are unwilling to buy foreign products and therefore trade dollars on international currency markets, then where are foreign countries meant to get the dollars with which to buy American products? Currency markets exist because trade exists. To be sure, it is true that fluctuations in exchange rates can be traced back to various phenomena—such as yield differentials, relative rates of inflation and economic growth, and current account surpluses and deficits—but, broadly speaking, the strength of a currency reflects the demand of foreigners for goods and services from that country as well as the investment potential in that country. In the nineteen-nineties, the strength of the U.S. Dollar reflected strong economic performance, stable growth in the money supply, fiscal responsibility, and demand from foreigners for U.S. Government securities. To ignore this link between export markets, import markets, and exchange markets can have terrible economic consequences.

But the biggest tragedy of protectionism lies in the unseen economic growth. Centuries ago, China was the world’s largest economy: a true dynamo and center of innovation and culture. But then it closed its borders to international trade and quickly sank into poverty as the rest of the world—in particular, trading cities like Venice and Amsterdam—became exceptionally wealthy. The Middle East experienced a very similar history. Once the center of mathematics and science, it quickly fell behind the West as dictatorships tried to control international markets while failing to promote Western innovations such as limited liability law. International competition puts downward pressure on prices, upward pressure on quality and forces people to specialize in that in which they have a comparative advantage. A true world market has the potential to unleash mankind’s innovative spirit in a way that could have profound benefits for everyone. Despite these benefits, however, Obama is not very interested in broad-scale free-trade and that, after his presidency, not much will have changed: partisanship will still fill the halls of Washington and only special free-trade arrangements will exist with our allies, such as with Korea and India, whereas broad-scale, open, free-trade will be sacrificed in an effort to protect workers from growing international competition. Moribund industries—particularly automotive industries—will continue to be subsidized, preventing that capital from being reallocated to more productive means. It seems that Reagan was right when he said “government’s view of the economy could be summed up in a few short phrases: if it moves, tax it. If it keeps moving, regulate it. And if it stops moving, subsidize it.” In the long-run, however, we are only hurting ourselves by kowtowing to the protectionist mystique.
Communication between people and their government is essential to the health of American democracy. Americans are constantly giving feedback to the government; frequently we send messages to the federal government through our votes, protests, and donations. But the business of government is a two-way street. In order to keep the government responsive and accountable to the people, our government and its officials must maintain a high degree of transparency. Historically speaking, Americans have largely remained in the dark about many governmental operations, like Japanese internment camps or deep-rooted lobbying in Congress. It is because of these past abuses that Americans ought to know what the government and its officials are doing.

This ideal of government being responsible to the people is exactly what President Obama has been calling for since the most recent presidential campaign. Presently, the White House website claims that, “[The Obama] Administration is committed to creating an unprecedented level of openness in Government.”

In the 2008 election, Americans heard the presidential candidates making promise after promise. Part of the post-partisan promise included a general shedding of the influence of special interests, thereby increasing transparency. To do so, the President proposed three policies which would considerably heighten government transparency: a centralized internet database of lobbying reports, ethics records, and campaign finance filings; a pledge to allot five days of public internet review after non-emergency bills are passed, but before they are signed; and a promise to televise all negotiations of the high-stakes and heavily industry lobbied Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. These policies would have allowed Americans to better observe their government. Rather than go through the futility of reading thousand-page bills prior to becoming law, citizens would have the opportunity to examine the basics of the bill, formulate opinions, and support or reprimand their representatives. But these proposed policies received little, if any, attention from President Obama in his first two years.

And it is, indeed, our president’s responsibility to enact these reforms—especially since he promised them not long ago. If President Obama can initiate and pass trillion dollar spending bills and squeak through a wildly controversial health care law, surely he could have gained a substantial amount of support for transparency reforms in his first two years, especially with one of the largest majorities in Congress since the Johnson era. These simple facts seem to suggest that the president has become no better than the average Washington politician—he has lost the “outsider” moniker he once proudly carried. If he truly did care about renewing the relationship between the government and governed, President Obama surely would have, at the very least, suggested these reforms to Congress. But his lack of care for transparency improvement is apparent in his decision to push through health care reform without his proposed condition of televised negotiations.

During these first two years of his term, it is unmistakable that President Obama did not transcend Washington or change how business is done there. If the second half of Obama’s term is anything like the first, then it is, unfortunately, all too likely that President Obama’s promises on transparency will remain empty, a fact that certainly will not help revitalize the broken relationship between Americans and their government.

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A s these lines are being written, the future of the Middle East is less certain than it had been for decades. As the world looks to Egypt, the most-dominant of the Arab countries, the final word from the White House remains to be given. At the chance of anachronism, we nonetheless still offer to gain some insight from Obama’s policy in the first two years of his tenure.

George Bush made the Middle East a cornerstone of his foreign policy, and so, upon election, Obama correctly recognized that this would be the global arena in which his policy of “Change” would be tested. Obama perceived Bush’s policy as based on cultural chauvinism towards the Muslim population of the region, a conceited conception of American power, a staunch belief in unilateralism, and an unquestioning fidelity to America’s regional allies. All these, according to Obama, prevented Bush from making progress on several important fronts, and caused a deterioration in America’s relationship not only with the people of the Middle East, but also with Europe. When Obama took office, he sought to change all that. As he fittingly entitled his Cairo Speech in June, 2009, this was “A New Beginning”.

Reading the Cairo Speech now, it is striking how candid Obama was in the policy goals he set out to accomplish. Instead of Bush’s supposed chauvinism, Obama offered understanding and conciliation. Instead of misguided military force, he offered engagement. Instead of unilateralism, he offered cooperation; and fidelity was replaced by revision. But Obama drew our attention to more than just policy change. He pointed out the change in personality, becoming perhaps the first American president to declare publicly his personality as a strategic asset.

Thus, it was not only policy change that was of importance to Obama’s Middle East policy. It was also the belief that he was the man to carry it out. Unsurprisingly, one of his first steps when he took office was to appoint two senior diplomats to serve as his personal emissaries to two of the region’s most problematic areas. This was Obama’s way of showing his commitment to regional affairs. The two diplomats were the now-deceased Richard Holbrooke, who was sent to the Afghanistan/Pakistan area; and George Mitchell, who was sent to mediate between Israel and the Palestinians. Both men, of course, had impressive personal records. Holbrooke was credited with the Dayton Agreement that ended the war in Bosnia, and similarly, Mitchell was a pivotal figure in brokering peace in Northern Ireland. But even impressive records do not help when sent on impossible missions. Obama’s personal efforts to “engage” were perceived in the region not as a tour de force, but as a sign of weakness. WikiLeaks proved to all that despite the best intentions, Obama’s Middle East diplomatic corps was perceived across the region as a ring of nudniks - a good word from the Yiddish lexicon signifying “nags”, - not as representatives of the world’s
only superpower. The only real achievement could be credited to Mitchell, who managed to unite Israelis and Palestinians in agreement that they would much rather deal with Hillary Clinton’s no-nonsense approach than the White House’s “engaging” diplomats.

Respecting differences is of course a worthy cause, however the “blanket argument” against the use of military force may have had unintended consequences. Again, it was perceived as a weakness, making it nearly impossible to make progress on any issue in the region: human rights, democracy, women’s equality, and above all, Iran. Iran is the Middle East’s most pivotal issue. Fear of the Ayatollahs has been proven by WikiLeaks to be shared by all governments in the region, and it is therefore Iran – and not, as previously assumed, the Palestinians – that is the most important issue to tackle. Resisting Iranian tyranny and Ahmadinejad’s grandiose power schemes would allow the Obama administration the diplomatic leverage needed to restore America’s status in the region, not Obama’s personality.

At the moment, it seems that Obama’s Middle East policy is based merely on not being George Bush. Unfortunately, it is this very attitude that is preventing him from making progress. Does “Change” in the Middle East actually mean no change at all?

Obama’s indecisiveness in the first few days of the Egyptian revolution very much reflects a continuation of this trend. This is not to deny that Obama is currently found in a very inconvenient position. Deliberation is a welcome sign from a leader. But there’s a caveat. His leadership has to be established first. The Middle East is yearning for American leadership. Will Obama be that leader? We cannot tell. But at the moment, in a region eagerly anticipating the arrival of the Messiah, the resurrection of Christ, and the reappearance of the Hidden Imam, they are still waiting for the leader Barack Obama.  

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Tax deductible donations can be sent to:

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For an annual subscription (3 issues) donations must be at least $50.
Even casual Vatican-watchers are likely familiar with the Italian proverb: “Always follow a fat pope with a skinny pope.” Hardly politically correct, this statement gestures at the remarkable diversity that obtains between successive occupants of the Chair of St. Peter. Not surprisingly, popular depictions—caricatures, more likely—emphasized a different theme upon Benedict XVI’s ascension to the papacy in the wake of Pope John Paul II’s death: continuity. If nothing else, this stubborn and bracing conversation with Peter Seewald—the fourth such collaboration between the two, and the first of Benedict’s papacy—reveals exactly how wrong the conventional wisdom regarding the former Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger has proven.

At its most trivial, this text is an intimate portrait of Pope Benedict. Tasked with the unenviable assignment of succeeding one of the most charismatic and most popular religious figures in modern history, Benedict—whose advanced age and serious demeanor have left him more vulnerable to jests than to plaudits—presents himself as comfortable within his own skin. Such genuine self-presentation humanizes Pope Benedict. Never during the reign of his predecessor would we learn—as we do here—that the Pope’s head is quite sensitive to the cold.

Or that his choice in garments might only reflect this quotidian annoyance, and that some papal actions are not driven by deeper ideological goals. Such observations aside, however, these personal conversations are rather boring. And Peter Seewald’s obsequious manner will frustrate all but the most tone-deaf readers. Few of us will find ourselves at all surprised—or concerned, for that matter—by the revelation that an octogenarian like Benedict finds his duties physically rather demanding. But Seewald’s penchant for stupid questions is eclipsed only by a style so deferential as to render him almost entirely uncritical. This is especially strange, given that probing queries like “Is it hard being you?” were mercifully absent from previous collaborations. True, they say, that turnabout is fair play, and readers sympathetic to Benedict might find some measure of relief in Seewald’s affability, given the characteristic incivility with which the pontiff is often received by mainstream media sources.

Thankfully, the majority of the text is devoted to serious issues, and Benedict’s readers will count themselves thankful to learn—or confirm, in many cases—that he is a serious man and an elegant spokesman. Unlike his predecessor—whose phenomenological writings were mediocre, at best—Benedict is a true intellectual: part historian, part philosopher, part theologian, and—much to his surprise—part politician. His stirring meditation upon the limits of science and the “intrinsic coherence of the logos”—remarkable especially in light of its

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extemporaneity—suggests a seriousness of thought in
the reconciliation of faith and reason that was never
exhibited by John Paul II, even in the latter’s encyclical
Fides et Ratio (1998), which dealt explicitly with very
similar issues.

Nevertheless, the mere need to rehearse what has
been a settled issue for thousands of years—at least in
the minds of Catholic theologians—is itself “a sign of
times,” though perhaps not one that either of the text’s
contributors would be keen to acknowledge. Indeed,
times have changed, and so—too much for some, too
little for others—has the Catholic Church. A surprising number
of questions is devoted to ecumenical relations. It is an irony
of which Benedict— himself a former prefect of what was
once the Office of the Holy Inquisition—seems strangely unaware. Few
of his remarks regarding Protestants or Muslims are of
great consequence, though it is in some sense remarkable
that Benedict does speak to these faiths without causing
offense by some slight, real or most likely imagined.

Benedict is most vocal—and perhaps most progressive—in his remarks on concerning Jews. Like
his predecessor—and uncharacteristically so—Benedict
seems to have taken an interest in closer relations with
the Jewish faith. But this amicable posture does not
deter him from confronting controversial issues. He
remains steadfast—and rightly so, in my judgment—in
his defense of the frequently defamed Pope Pius XII,
and refutes the typical litany of charges against a man
familiar to many as “Hitler’s Pope” with an impressive
array of factual evidence. Benedict’s conciliatory posture
is more in evidence in his remarks on the so-called
“Williamson Affair,” where he evinces contrition for his
early unawareness of Bishop Williamson’s absurd denial
of the Holocaust.

This text was largely unscathed by the controversy
that ordinarily surrounds Benedict’s pronouncements,
and the Bishop of Rome won praise from some
unusual quarters for remarks that were construed to an
endorsement of the use of condoms by gay men. In this
instance—as in many others—the mainstream reception
was characteristically strange. Benedict will likely surprise
his readers with a statement that condoms—though
“not a real or moral solution”—might nonetheless “in
the intention of reducing the risk of infection, [prove] a
first step in a movement toward a more human way of
living sexuality.” The extent to which this statement—
ambiguous by any standard—is meant to apply only to
gay males is not apparent, and could signal the dawn of a
new debate within the Catholic Church.

Of course, those hoping for such a debate must also
take into account Benedict’s confident reiteration of Pope
Paul VI’s encyclical Humanae Vitae (1968), which outlined
Rome’s present position on artificial contraception.
More vexing to others might be Benedict’s resolute
condemnation of homosexual behavior—a position that
stands uneasily alongside the notion that gay men might
be well-served by the use of condoms. But such tension
is typical of Benedict’s thought, even when he appears to stand
his ground doctrinally. He is—despite all contentions to the
contrary—a subtle mind that we cannot easily characterize in
ideological terms. In the end, this pope and this text are likely to satisfy few,
from the occasional sympathetic reader.

It is then perhaps another “sign of the times”—or
an irony—that few outside this sympathetic audience
will likely take the time to read even so short and fluid a
text. Its tone—meant, I think to be hopeful—seems to
incorporate this dreary reality into the numerous denials
and defenses that Benedict finds it necessary to rehearse.
A litany of scandals has—rightly or wrongly—tarnished
the moral voice of the Catholic Church, and the spiritual
cost of these misadventures is evident throughout the
text. The first few chapters—where, incidentally, the
abuse scandal is prominently featured—come across not
so much in propadeutic, but rather defensive terms. And
only when such a pre-emptive defense has been erected
can Benedict turn to the deeper issues of the day. This
is a shame.

In the wake of a global financial crisis, where one
might imagine Catholic social teaching should receive
newfound and serious attention, Benedict’s eloquent pleas
for Christian charity seem largely as though they will fall on deaf ears.”
Three Cheers


By Jeremy Rozansky

“I myself have accepted the term, perhaps, because, having been named Irving, I am relatively indifferent to baptismal caprice.”

So said Irving Kristol of having been called a “neoconservative.” Initially used as an insult for a class of ex-leftist, Jewish intellectuals, the label stuck, in part because of its unintentional accuracy and in part because of Kristol’s wry acceptance. The quote reveals something else about Irving Kristol: that he was a happy warrior, armed with brutal charm and a practical wit.

This is the Kristol one sees again and again in the pages of an impressive posthumous collection of his works The Neoconservative Persuasion. What is, perhaps, most striking at the outset is how highlights from the life’s work of a man who is known for having split from his youthful Trotskyism and eventually become an intellectual giant for American conservatives, can show a series of sentiments and concerns that stay constant from youth to old age. Kristol’s wife, Gertrude “Bea” Himmelfarb and his son, William, found an eclectic range of articles, all but one never before published in a Kristol volume. Each is an intentional inclusion, and it becomes clear that Kristol’s dexterity stretches across the same foundation.

Kristol’s body of work became both the template of the neoconservative narrative and the greatest contribution to the neoconservative scripture. He came to be known as the godfather of neoconservatism. Shaped by the debates in Alcove 2 at City College of New York (Alcove 2 was for the Trotskyites, Alcove 1 belonged to the Stalinists), Kristol was active in the New York scene of predominantly Jewish intellectuals. By the time Kristol came back from the armed forces in World War Two, he had largely given up his Trotskyism. As an editor and writer for many magazines and quarterlies, Kristol showed an unpredictability that is especially well preserved in this collection. Like the other neoconservatives, Kristol turned against the left over the campus rebellions, the too-often pale or nonexistent anti-communism, and the excesses of the civil rights movement—bussing and affirmative action—that contradicted the cause of equality. Watching the descent of the cities into vice and chaos also instigated a powerful critique of the welfare state by men like Kristol. All four issues and others feature prominently in any grouping of Kristol’s work.

The collection is called The Neoconservative Persuasion, because it is not clear how else to label neoconservatism. It is certainly not an ideology as it is too incomplete and has no discernable doctrine. It is called a strain, the most important (and first indigenous) strain in contemporary American conservatism, but it is too independent for that. It is not a movement—where are the rallies? It is best thought of as a persuasion, a multivalenced tendency or disposition centered on a few key points such as using social science while understanding its limits, holding the culture to moral as well as realistic expectations, cheering on capitalism while scolding its overenthusiastic supporters, and others. Kristol called it a persuasion based on historian Marvin Meyers’ definition. A persuasion, in this sense, “manifests itself over time, but erratically, and [its] meaning we clearly glimpse only in retrospect.”

So it is appropriate that The Neoconservative Persuasion is a retrospective. The collection begins with a review of W. H. Auden from a magazine Kristol founded after college called Enquiry (which was modeled after Partisan Review) and concludes with his capstone essay in the last issue of his five-decade, public policy quarterly The Public Interest. The essays, forty-eight in total, are grouped by topics.

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In the “Memoirs” section that ends the book, Kristol has his “An Autobiographical Memoir” originally written for Neoconservatism: An Autobiography of an Idea, a book tantamount to a more focused first volume to The Neoconservative Persuasion. “An Autobiographical Memoir” is a helpful introduction for those who have never read Kristol or know little of him. In it, he identifies two main influences on his thought: Lionel Trilling and Leo Strauss. The first topic of the collection comprises five essays of literary criticism from Enquiry. Here we see Trilling’s die imprinted on Kristol. An essay from 1944 inspired by Trilling, “The Moral Critic,” discusses the Left’s failure to concern itself with morality as an end and failure to see humans as they are. To reconcile these tendencies, Kristol speaks of what E. M. Forster called “moral realism.” Kristol defines it thus:

Moral realism is aware of the paradoxical quirks of morality; it knows that good-and-evil are more often to be found than good versus evil. Though dissatisfied, of course, with the ways of men, it forsees no new virtues, but, at best, a healthier distribution of the old. It is not eschatological, skeptical of proposed revisions of man’s nature, interested in human beings as it finds them, content with the possibilities and limitations that are always with us.

This sounds a awful lot like Burckan conservatism. Later down the page, we can see just how much this sensibility stuck with Kristol. Forster sums up his politics as “So two cheers for Democracy; there is no reason to give three.” To this, Kristol responds, “And so it is with politics, reform, revolution, war, social planning—what were once unquestioned goods now call forth two well meaning cheers.” Kristol, of course, used this very image in his most famous work, Two Cheers for Capitalism in which he gave a defense of capitalism while admitting its imperfections. Even in 1944, Kristol could only give anything two cheers, not the usual three. This sensibility, this skepticism, this mature understanding that with the good comes the bad, and this realism to accept it would, more than any other persuasion, define Kristol’s career.

Perhaps this is best supplemented by the next section, called “Ancients and Moderns.” Here are a few essays that reflect the way in which Strauss influenced Kristol. The most staggering of the bunch is a review of Strauss’ Persecution and the Art of Writing, a strange, complicated book on how to read the Medieval political philosophers. The book preceded Strauss’ later fame and far preceded Strauss’ later, undeserved, infamy. In the review, Kristol correctly identifies the possibility of Leo Strauss. “[I]f in time the victory goes to Professor Strauss, he will have accomplished nothing less than a revolution in intellectual history.” While the neoconservative revolution is not the same as the possible Straussian revolution herein mentioned, Strauss is seen in Kristol’s long intellectual view and willingness to criticize modernity, at times, at its amoral roots.

The next few sections show a Kristol more concerned with practical politics and matters of public policy than before. “Democracy in America” features his moral-sociological criticisms of the Great Society, and a controversial essay on McCarthyism that helped drive the left away from him for the simple fact that he did not describe the left as mere victims. “The Culture and Counterculture” samples Kristol’s responses to the 1960s’ shock to American mores. “Vice and Virtue in Las Vegas” and “It’s Obscene but Is It Art?” are fun, but also deceptively wise and measured. “Capitalism, Conservatism, and Neoconservatism” locates the heart of Kristol’s neoconservatism: the critique and defense of capitalism in moral, not mathematical, argument. Following these is “Foreign Policy and Ideology,” an overlooked part of Kristol’s corpus that effectively assaults both liberal internationalism and isolationism.

The penultimate section focuses on the Jewish writings of Irving Kristol. Kristol admits in “An Autobiographical Memoir” that, even as a Trotskyist, when he read the King James Version of The Bible “and was immediately persuaded that the Book of Genesis was, in some nonliteral sense, true.” Having been, as he says, neo-Marxist, neo-Trotskite, neo-socialist, neo-liberal, and eventually neoconservative, he locates the source of all these neos in a permanent attachment to “neo-orthodox” religious views. While often hesitant to practice and theologically unsure as modern men so often are, Kristol’s neo-orthodoxy prevents him from endorsing the oft-arrogant and misguided modernization of Judaism. In a 1948 essay “How Basic is ‘Basic Judaism?’” Kristol takes on an emblematic modernizer, Rabbi Milton Steinberg, a follower of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan’s efforts to “reconstruct” Judaism as a sociological instrument. The problem with Steinberg is that “[h]is is a religion of the good deed and the good community, in a time when the quality of the good deed is anything but self-evident, and the good community is only a dream of something that might have existed. It strikes me—and I say this with no disingenuousness—as considerably too good for us.” It is an intellectually halow religion, unable to face up to the moral complexity of Rabbinic Judaism. It takes a Judaism already insufficient to the questions of modernity and makes it more insufficient so as to avoid the question entirely. In the style of moral realism, Kristol desires that Judaism be able to deal with modern man as he is, without emasculating its ethical sense in favor of the theories of John Dewey.

His later Jewish writings stem from this desire. The essays after this focus on the odd habit of Jewish support for liberal causes. Kristol effectively outlines how the political working of the Jewish establishment is not, in
fact, good for the Jews. But a sense pervades several of the essays that the source of this problem is the same as the problem in the Steinberg review. Jews have replaced sincere intellectual reflection on the ethical texts with a simple, progressive ethic akin to secular humanism. They cannot address the modern challenges to Judaism, especially its particularism, without awarding victory to modernity in a universalistic uniquely modern form called “Prophetic Judaism” that is solely interested in political utopianism. On this, Kristol is more subtle than I have been, but more biting as well. The Jews, Kristol later says, need a genuine, indigenous tradition of political thought to challenge this absurd importation. I believe this will be among the accomplishments of the next few generations of neoconservative heirs like The Shalem Center in Israel and others in the United States.

There are, of course, some faults with the collection. Some articles are redundant, others desperately require introductory explanations of their theme and context. The book is best read alongside Neconservatism: An Autobiography of an Idea, which has many essays of similar themes. But that book is about Kristol the neoconservative, whereas this one is much more intimate, showing us Kristol the thinking man. Perhaps the intimacy is a result of the eulogy delivered by Bill and the broad, but not breathy introduction by his wife, Bea. Of Bea we are reminded that Daniel Bell, Kristol’s collaborator on The Public Interest, once called Irving and Bea’s marriage “the best of [his] generation.” The Neoconservative Persuasion is a portrait of the enduring sentiments and ideas of Irving Kristol, as chosen by Bea. It is therefore not only a collection of statements about humans and their politics, but a gift from wife to husband. It is the meditation of man with most admirable sentiments: love of family, love of country, and two cheers for just about everything else.

A Delightful Subtlety
A review of “True Grit”

By Michael Talent

“True Grit” is a remake of a John Wayne Western, and a throwback to that style of filmmaking. The story is about a fourteen-year-old girl, Mattie Ross, who hires Marshal Reuben “Rooster” Cogburn to hunt down her father’s killer, Tom Chaney. “True Grit” provides a great story and deep characters. Hailee Steinfeld, who plays Mattie, provides a perfect mix of innocence inherent in a fourteen year old with the maturity that comes from having to grow up quickly to meet the demands of living in the 19th century west at such an early age. For example, she attempts to intimidate Marshal Rooster Cogburn, played by Jeff Bridges, to help her by threatening to sue him. In addition, the dialogue is fantastic. The phrasing and word choice completely sets the film in the West, while also providing humor in what is otherwise a very heavy film. And critics have praised “True Grit” for precisely these qualities. Yet, there has been much talk about the philosophical and political message of the film from commentators like Stanley Fish, Peter Lawler, and Ken Masugi talking about the nihilistic message of the film or the appropriate use of violence.

The reason for most of the discussion regarding “True Grit’s” message is it is hard to find. There are, of course, common themes that appear in almost all Western films: rugged individualism, the need for law and order, and an unapologetic, if somewhat romantic, view of the creation of America. Mattie’s self-reliance

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borders on arrogance at times, and Rooster Cogburn is as tough as they come. The necessity of shooting the bad guys is unquestioned, but so, also, is the need for a better police force to take back the lawless area in which these men roam. Finally, the movie does not attempt to make Indian removal, racism, or any other politically correct statement concerning the Wild West.

But “True Grit” makes no attempt to hit its viewers over the head with these themes. The film avoids parading its message, rather, it hints at it. For example, the characters display their toughness by traveling through the great, snowy expanse of wilderness. Similarly, when Marshal Cogburn’s charges against outlaw Ned Pepper and three of his gang by himself on horse, one is reminded of the necessity of having “rough men” ready to protect society. In addition, the character development of Mattie Ross into a worldly, cynical, but independent woman reflects the importance and power of self-reliance. However, during the film, these messages are not advertised in any way. Any messages within the film feel natural, necessitated by the plot and not the writer’s, director’s, or producer’s worldview. This returns to the idea of “True Grit” as a good story. There is a message, but it is sublimated into the actual narrative thread.

That is, for me, the appeal of “True Grit.” It is a good movie, not a vehicle for a message. Initially, I did not leave the theater with my family talking about the conservative meaning of the film. Instead, we talked about the characters and the plot. Such subtlety is something that is conspicuously lacking in American cinema today, which is full of left-leaning films that beat the viewer over the head with their message of American greed (“The Other Guys”), the evil of the Iraq war (“Redacted”), or the danger of the national security role of the government (the Bourne trilogy).

“True Grit” also provides a lesson for conservative filmmakers. While it is a film that tells a story for the story’s sake, not to advance some message, the themes of the story are fundamentally conservative. The presentation of this message is subtle and very effective. The effect that “True Grit” has on its audiences argues that making films with an explicit message, even conservative ones like “Team America” or the awful, yet oddly funny, “American Carol,” may not be the best way of establishing a right-wing segment of film. “True Grit” shows that a film can be conservative just by virtue of its story and faithfulness to its premises. That is, because the Western genre of filmmaking, which “True Grit” faithfully adheres to, is already inherently right wing, there is no need to supplement a conservative political message onto it. This is true for genres like war movies, spy thrillers, cop films, and others. They are inherently conservative because making a good film in that genre necessitates accepting conservative premises. To add a conservative message onto them would be redundant.

There is much to enjoy in “True Grit,” and one of those things is trying to understand its embedded message. And, to an extent, what I have done can be considered an argument that “True Grit” is a conservative film with a conservative message. I will not take time here to consider what that message may or may not be, though I have touched on it. There is much discussion about this, from people much more qualified than I to consider such questions. But, no matter what ideology you hold, “True Grit” is a film worth seeing. Part of the reason it is worth seeing is because it will not beat you over the head with messages. But, the main reason anyone should see “True Grit” is because it is a great film. The acting is sound, the dialogue is a pleasure to hear, the scenery is impressive, and the action is exciting. CP
No One Knows About Totalitarianism

A review of “No One Knows about Persian Cats”

By Yiftach Ofek

“No One Knows about Persian Cats” is a film about Tehran’s underground western music scene. Its plotline is simple. Not much happens. Ashkan and his girlfriend Negar are a teenage couple who front the alternative rock band “Persian Cats”. They try to recruit more musicians while planning a tour outside Iran. With the help of Nader, a fellow musician and local “contrabandist”, they explore various bands around Tehran, all while attempting to obtain fake passports. The couple explores unusual locations for band practices, in assorted locales ranging from construction sites to animal barns, where the cows are treated to a musical spectacle.

The pace of the movie quickens near the end, when armed policemen invade the apartment where a party was taking place. Ashkan, fleeing the policemen, throws himself out of the window. We do not know what happens to him. Hearing about it, Negar also throws herself off a balcony. We do not know what happens to her either. But the movie has no intention of tying up loose ends. Portraying life in modern Iran without these loose ends would be impossible. To understand why, we need to keep in mind that this type of music, played under these specific conditions, is not a mere aesthetic pursuit. It is a political statement. “No One Knows about Persian Cats” is a powerful exposure of the nature of totalitarianism, and the people who live under its regime. It cannot be seen as anything less.

As opposed to being driven purely by a story, this movie is instead driven by its realism, cinematography, and naturally, its soundtrack. Resembling the abrupt documentary style employed in Christopher Guest films and television shows like “The Office” or “Modern Family”, the camera-work gives the film an air of realism that further empowers its message, made all the more powerful by the subtlety of its exposition. Totalitarianism is never explicitly discussed, merely alluded to.

In a powerful scene, Ashkan and Negar drive through the streets of Tehran with a Labrador retriever puppy in Ashkan’s lap. They suddenly get pulled over by a policeman who the viewer cannot fully see. When Negar asks the policeman what the problem is, he informs her that it is forbidden to drive with dogs in the car, and demands that she surrender the dog to him. Ashkan and Negar resist, but eventually the policeman takes the dog. Again, we are left not knowing the dog’s fate. We only know that the dog was taken away by the faceless power that upholds the law. Such is totalitarianism. Such is modern Iran.

The film was directed by Iranian-Kurdish director Bahman Ghobadi, who directed the much-acclaimed “Turtles Can Fly” in 2004, the first film produced in post-liberation Iraq. At the time, many reviewers in the West could not help noting the mildly-articulated yet prominent pro-American stance of that film, depicting as it did the suffering of the Kurdish community under Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath Party. While focusing on the Kurds, Ghobadi exposed to Western eyes the people who suffered under authoritarian rule. Similarly, in “Persian Cats”, Ghobadi brings to our attention an element often missing from our discourse about Iran. By that I mean

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that although surely Ghobadi’s criticism is directed against Iranian tyranny, I wonder whether some of his criticism was directed against the West’s recent ambivalence toward the totalitarian phenomenon.

Such criticism, of course, would not be unfounded. After all, wasn’t totalitarianism passé? We seemed to have abandoned the question totalitarianism long ago. The collapse of the Berlin Wall, the international military campaigns against nationalist aggression in Iraq and the Balkans, the peace processes in Northern Ireland and the Middle East, the expansion of NATO and the solidification of the European Union, all pushed studies of totalitarianism out of vogue. We had other things to concentrate on. Now that the democratic West won over the tyrannical East, we could focus on expanding democracy ever more. We could focus on things like “recognition” of differences and minorities, and accepting the “others” in our midst.

But while we were busy celebrating our victory, did we forget the moral gulf that separated democratic government from a tyrannical one? As Paul Berman pointed out in his excellent 2003 book “Terror and Liberalism”, totalitarianism continued to reign and thrive under our unwatchful eyes. Paradoxically, we were so busy celebrating the “other” that we allowed ourselves to be blinded to the moral plight of fellow human beings. In other words, we forgot that totalitarianism still existed in the world. It is this lesson that Ghobadi teaches us in respect to Iran. There are people there like us. They are not nameless “others”. They listen and play music that is like ours. They deserve a better life.

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- Edmund Burke

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