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“Make it known to your students that Maimonides was Islamic civilization’s gift to the Jews.”

Jerry Haber

Where We Orthodox Jews Have Gone Wrong — And How We Can Make Amends

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Stefan Merken

From Where I Sit

Stefan Merken is Chair of the Jewish Peace Fellowship.

MY WIFE BETTY AND I ARE IN ITALY. WE HAVE RENTED A car and are staying in small hill towns on the southern edge of Tuscany, bordering Umbria. Both Tuscany and Umbria are alive with color and texture right now, resulting from strong spring rains and intermittent blasts of sun, which have created a palette of various rich greens, rolling hills and farmlands punctuated by wild red field poppies and brilliant yellow Scotch broom.

Yesterday found us in the delightful small hill town of Pitigliano. As Italian hill towns go, Pitigliano is a wonderful collage of Etruscan and Roman walls which have been integrated into the fabric of the buildings, clinging to hillsides of porous volcanic tufa rock.

Our reason for seeking out this particular town lies in its long and rich Jewish history. For many years we have enjoyed and treasured a cookbook, *The Classic Cuisine of the Italian Jews*, written by Edda Servli Machlin, who grew up in Pitigliano. Edda, coincidentally, was a member of former JPF chairman Rabbi Michael Robinson's synagogue in Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y., for several years. Her book not only details the cuisine of the Italian Jews, but serves as a memoir and a cultural history of Pitigliano.

When she was growing up, Edda's father and grandfather had been the rabbis in Pitigliano, which was then known as Little Jerusalem. Before 1945 Pitigliano was a thriving Jewish cultural center and had a large and thriving Jewish population. The Jews of Pitigliano were very close with their fellow townspeople in all aspects of life. When the war came, townspeople hid their Jewish neighbors in Pitigliano's hillsides and in caves and consequently many Jews survived. Today you can walk through little side streets lined with stone houses and find the synagogue (which was bombed during the war but which has been completely and beautifully restored), the underground mikvah, slaughter house, and the underground



Pitigliano, in Tuscany, Italy. The town's synagogue is the third building on the left, with the round window. Photo: Stefan Merken

matzo ovens.

Curious why Jews would settle in this small Italian town as far back as the 1400s, I discovered that the Orsini family gave refuge to Jews when they were being driven out of other areas in Italy. Half a century later they were allowed to stay but had to live in a ghetto. Later they were granted more freedom. Hidden by townspeople during threatening periods and especially during World War II, they thrived in Italy's hills. From the 1920s and 1930s until the Germans arrived, Pitigliano hosted a beautiful synagogue and two yeshivas, and people came from all over Europe to study here.

Now, despite the fact that only three elderly Jews remain, one deeply senses the legacy of their former presence, and the affection and admiration that this small hill town shared with them. Please consider putting a visit to Pitigliano in your travel plans. You will be greatly enriched by the experience. ✨

SHALOM *Jewish Peace Letter*

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HONORARY PRESIDENT Rabbi Philip J. Bentley • **CHAIR** Stefan Merken • **VICE PRESIDENT** Rabbi Leonard Berman
EDITORS Murray Polner & Adam Simms • **CONTRIBUTING EDITORS** Lawrence S. Wittner & Patrick Henry

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Kent State Remembered

AMERICANS OF A CERTAIN AGE MAY REMEMBER THE

deaths of four Kent State University students and the wounding of nine others when, on May 4, 1970, Ohio National Guardsmen opened fire on them. One of the wounded is still paralyzed from the shooting. Despite several trials, studies and many books, in the end no one has been held accountable for the bloodletting. Nor have questions surrounding the tragedy ever been stilled. On May 12, 2010, for example, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, following up on one of its reporter's findings that an audio recording from that day indicated that National Guardsmen were told to prepare to shoot at students, many of whom (but by no means all) were not protesting the calamitous Vietnam War. On the tape a Guard officer calls out, "All right, prepare to fire." The newspaper's editorial called on Ohio's governor to establish a commission "to study the tape, incident reports and eyewitness testimony and give a full accounting of that tragic day."

Antiwar protests in Kent erupted throughout the country following President Richard Nixon's TV speech on April 30, 1970, announcing that U.S. forces had invaded Cambodia, enlarging a war he had once pledged to end. The next day Nixon denounced antiwar students everywhere as "bums." On May 3, Ohio Governor

James Rhodes, running for a Senate seat (he lost) called antiwar students "worse than brown shirts and the Communist element and also night riders and vigilantes. They are the worst type people that we harbor in America."

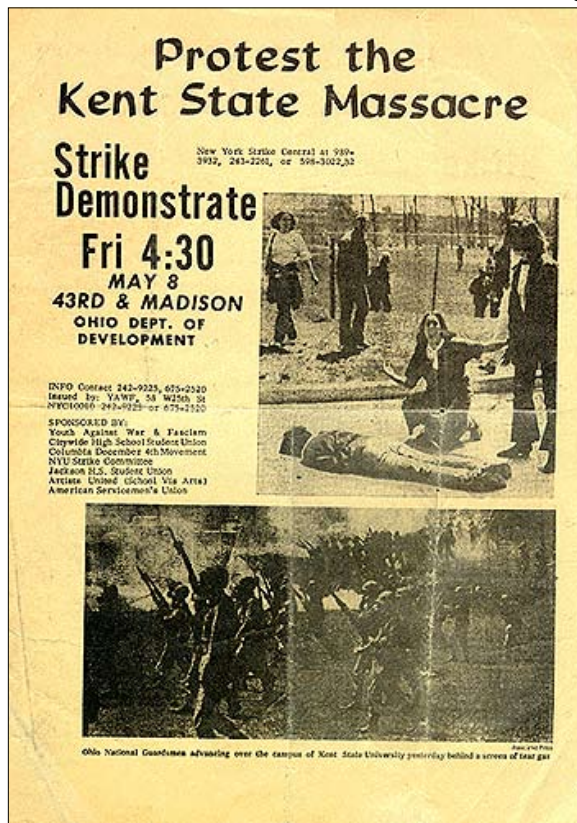
The stage was now set for official violence. Later polls reported widespread approval by Americans for the shootings. The Scranton Commission's 1970 verdict, its *Report of the Presidential Commission on Campus Unrest*, partially echoed that unjustified sentiment but finally concluded that "the indiscriminate firing of rifles into a crowd of students and the deaths that followed were unnecessary, unwarranted and inexcusable." (See the Jackson State killing of two students and the wounding of 30 others 10 days later. Again, no one was blamed.)

Books about the killings abound. Kent State University's library has established a remarkable collection about the still unresolved tragedy. Meanwhile, "History," as the *Plain Dealer* editorial right-

ly concluded, "is worth getting right."

Here, 40 years later, Kent resident Caroline Arnold remembers.

— Murray Polner



Students' deaths at Kent State University sparked campus protests around the nation, including New York University. Source: NYU Archives Collection

Caroline Arnold

Truth Wasn't Murdered May 4. People Were.

Before joining Senator John Glenn's Washington staff in 1985, Caroline Arnold taught, founded a small business, and served three terms on the Kent, Ohio, Board of Education. She is principal cellist of the Stow Symphony.

IN OCTOBER 2009 I RECEIVED AN E-MAIL FROM ONE Jonathan Hartley that reproduced the header of my *Common Dreams* essay of May 7, 2004, "What Really

Happened at Kent State" [<http://www.commondreams.org/view/04/0507-01.htm>], followed by this paragraph:

"What really happened at Kent State was that the truth was murdered, and the vicious, evil, immoral march of Marxism around the world found its first foothold in America. But the truth can't be buried, because even after all these years, we are going to preserve it forever. The misinformation and lies won't stand. I teach my 14 year old about the brave people

of that town who endured a year of intimidation, assaults and persecution at the hands of communist militants. A year of abuse before something was finally done to defend them from the 'liberators of mankind.' All of the Kent State traitors owe an abject apology to the people of Kent State and to America. And they should have been prosecuted for murder." [*That last sentence printed was printed in red.*]

My first reaction was to respond: *Were you in Kent in May of 1970? Can you name some "brave people of the town" and document the persecution they endured? Just who would you prosecute for murder?* But I quickly realized the futility of challenging Mr. Hartley. I can't square his truth with my experience, but nothing I could say would change his mind.

I lived in Kent through the protests. It's true that misinformation and lies circulated around town: Students for a Democratic Society is going to blow up the Main Street Bridge on Friday; Black Panthers have taken over Hudson (a neighboring town); the rioters are controlled by Communists from a Soviet submarine in West Branch Reservoir; Allison Krause, a student shot and killed by National Guardsmen, "was so eaten up by venereal disease she would have died anyway."

It's also true there were outsiders on campus, perhaps hoping for glory by organizing the students to some newsworthy action. If so, they failed miserably. Whatever other words might describe the student protests, "organized" is not one. For that matter, the response of the university and the local, state and national officials can hardly be described as "organized" either.

The ensuing events, though unplanned, were certainly newsworthy, but they arose more from misunderstanding and mismanagement than from Communist plots or authoritarian repression; more from internal dissonance than outside agitation; more from official arrogance, bureaucratic disorder and student frustration than calculated organization or Communist militants; more from rumor than reason, more from fear than fact.

Truth wasn't murdered at Kent State. People were murdered; people were wounded, hurt, frightened and bewildered, and much damage was done across the community and university.

At a forum at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Kent on May 2, 2004, a Kent veteran of Vietnam spoke out:

"I'm still trying to reconcile my hometown to what happened here ... I can't understand ... [near tears]... understand it, and it's not finished yet. Kent State is my Vietnam Wall ... and Kent State belongs to everyone in this country, in the world And now we're still going through the same thing in Iraq to obtain peace.... In 1972 I voted for Nixon. But May 4 followed me

everywhere. People would say "Where are you from?" and when I said "Kent, Ohio," they always said, "Oh, that's where they shoot students." ... It needs to be embraced. I can't be responsible for all the babies and bombs of Vietnam, of Iraq. But we have to take it ... we have to walk with it."

Finally, in 2010, we have an opportunity to take hold of some truths about what happened here and seek some rapprochement we can live with. This year Allison Krause's sister Laurel and their mother Doris have initiated a Kent State Truth Tribunal to document the personal narratives of participants and witnesses to the campus events of 40 years ago. Stories were recorded in downtown Kent during May 1-4, and will be available as streaming video on the web site www.MichaelMoore.com. (For more information, browse <http://truthtribunal.org/about>.)

The Krause family is seeking restorative justice, not bad guys to blame or traitors to prosecute. They hope to shed light on the causes of and responsibilities for the tragic events of May 4, 1970, and clarify the role of protest and civil rights in our democracy.

Also this year, in another unique project, Kent residents are being invited to submit fabric squares reflecting their memories of May 4 to create a community story quilt that will engage people and get them talking about healing, hope and peace.

It is a strong metaphor: truth as a quilt assembled from patches of personal memories and pieces of shared dreams, stitched together with mutual respect and kindness into a usable reality that protects and warms us.

The Kent veteran was right: We need truths about May 4 that we can talk about, take in our arms, and walk with into the future.

But he also reminded us: *"And now we're still going through the same thing in Iraq to obtain peace."*

... and who is responsible for the babies and bombs of Iraq, of Afghanistan?

P.S. I remain hopeful that the Truth Tribunal may restart convivial conversations around the May 4 tragedy, though I see little evidence of that so far. I find myself less optimistic than ever that we as a nation can have convivial conversations with our neighbors — about national and foreign policy, war, and energy and global warming — broad enough and soon enough to forestall disaster. ✧

This essay appeared originally in the Kent-Ravenna [Ohio] Record Courier.

Elaine Durbach

Bar Mitzvahs and Politics in South Africa

Elaine Durbach is the bureau chief for the central edition of New Jersey Jewish News, and a founding member of the New Jersey-based Professionals in the Media.

MY FAMILY CELEBRATED ISRAEL'S BAR MITZVAH around the same time as we celebrated my brother's. Given that there were only about 100 Jews where we lived, in Lusaka, Zambia, there were roughly the same number of people at both events.

None of our non-Jewish friends were invited. We Jews in Southern Africa didn't go around making a big deal about being Jewish. It was something we did privately, with our fellow tribal members.

That is part of what has been so weird for me about the huge furor raised about the bar mitzvah of Judge Richard Goldstone's grandson in Johannesburg on May 1 — which the international jurist was almost forced to miss.

In the end, he attended the ceremony and everything was smoothed over, but in the weeks before the event, members of the South African Zionist Organization threatened to protest outside the shul, to express their fury over his United Nations report criticizing Israel's conduct during the war in Gaza. To save his family and the congregation from such unpleasantness, he volunteered to stay away.

They used to be so proud of him. In the 1990s, Goldstone was appointed chief prosecutor of the international criminal tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, and was involved in inquiries in Argentina, Kosovo, and Iraq. South Africans, accustomed to the years of pariah status that came with apartheid, reveled in one of their own being shown such respect. South Africa's Jews *kvelled* most of all. Though some of his work has drawn criticism, that pride grew even more when he — despite being a Jew — was chosen to head up the UN's Gaza inquiry last year.

But when the commission accused Israel of war crimes, affection turned to vitriolic hatred. If Israeli and American Jews accused him of betrayal, you can imagine how much

more intense the South African Jewish rejection was. The official response was respectful, coming from a government that has been sympathetic to the Palestinians all along, but that fueled Jews' fury all the more. He was seen as inflaming anti-Semitism and thus endangering their well-being as well as Israel's.

In a TV interview with Bill Moyers last October, Goldstone — who is living in the United States — talked of the emotional stress the report cost him, the fact that the Israeli government rebuffed his attempts to get information, and that he had also pointed a finger of blame at Hamas. But from what

I have read and heard, in South Africa only those dismissed as self-hating radicals acknowledged any of that.

Even the chief rabbi of South Africa, Warren Goldstein — who, I am told, celebrated his own son's bar mitzvah that same day at another synagogue in Johannesburg — expressed utter disdain for Goldstone. He wrote an article describing Goldstone's Gaza report as “a disgrace to the most basic notions of justice, equality and the rule of law.”

But back to the bar mitzvah protest threat: Aside from my horror that a group of South African Jews could be so militant in their anger that they could make a grandfather consider missing such a special event, I found it discomforting that the row had become so public that the media — in South Africa and then abroad — thought it interesting enough

to cover, and *then* that more Jews went public with their reactions to it, pro and con.

In the old days, that would never have happened, not in Southern Africa.

Not that we encountered much discrimination, but we were a very small minority within a small minority. In Zambia, white culture was British — complete with hot-potato accents, sundowner gin-and-tonics, and talk of “home.” In the rest of the subcontinent, the English-speaking part was only slightly less colonial, and Jews did their best to blend in.

Our Zionism was taken for granted, but very private. Being a Jew meant loving Israel. End of story. My mother belonged to WIZO, the Women's International Zionist Organization. All I knew was that it had something to do with baking



Justice Richard Goldstone, pictured in 2007, chaired the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict.

Photo: BlatantNews.com/Flickr.com

a lot, and that none of my friends would have recognized that weird word.

In the mid-1960s I was sent to high school in Cape Town, where most of our family lived. I found myself in a big social circle of Jewish teenagers. A bunch of my new friends had been to Habonim Camp; they were passionate about Israel, but even more passionate about the sexual freedom they found at camp. Their mothers all belonged to WIZO.

And then came the Six-Day War. It made being Jewish a whole lot cooler, and for once our non-Jewish compatriots seemed impressed by our little Israel. Its brave fight against the Soviet-backed Arab states meshed quite comfortably in our minds with the antigovernment, anti-apartheid position taken by most Jews. Feisty Helen Suzman, for years the lone member of the Progressive Party in Parliament, was one of ours.

But that didn't mean sticking one's neck out too far. There were Jews who went to jail or were forced to flee the country because of their anti-apartheid activism, but most Jews stayed under the radar.

When Rabbi David Rosen, now international director of interreligious affairs at the American Jewish Committee, gave a sermon in the Sea Point synagogue in Cape Town, talking on a fast day about the hunger faced every day by so many black South Africans, I remember people walking out in protest. They objected to him mixing religion and politics, and thought it risked drawing official disapproval to the community.

That is what was so odd about the Goldstone affair. While the rage against the judge stemmed from a belief that he was endangering Jewish safety, the threatened protests could themselves have inflamed anti-Semitic sentiment in South Africa. Those Jews were breaking the old code of discretion.

For all my cringing at their blind support for military be-



Green and Sea Point Hebrew Congregation, Cape Town. Photo: www.jewishvirtual-library.org

havior even some Israeli soldiers criticized, and the ugliness of their bullying tactics, there was something kind of impressive: They showed a confidence we never used to possess. I just wished they had found a more uplifting message to take public.

In the end, a more noble principle did prevail. Goldstein helped broker an agreement that Goldstone would meet with leaders from the Jewish establishment to discuss his report, and in return the protestors agreed to let his family celebrate in peace.

The chief rabbi wrote: "...I feel so strongly that the synagogue be open to Judge Goldstone, even though he has done so much wrong in the world. This is not about him. It is about the eternal principle of open synagogues, of a Judaism of peace and gentleness, a Judaism of openness and compassion." And he asked that everyone let the whole matter quietly subside. ✧

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Jerry Haber

Where We Orthodox Jews Have Gone Wrong — And How We Can Make Amends

Jeremiah (Jerry) Haber, an Orthodox Jewish studies and philosophy professor, divides his time between the U.S. and Israel and writes the blog Magnes Zionist.

MEMO

TO: The President of Yeshiva University, the Executive Vice President Emeritus of the Orthodox Union, and the Director of Public Policy, Orthodox Union

FROM: Jerry Haber

RE: Recognizing the Sin of Bigotry, and Eradicating It

GENTLEMEN, I ADDRESS THIS TO YOU BECAUSE I KNOW you personally and admire you greatly. I have been members of the same synagogue as you, and one of you has been my rabbi.

Perhaps you saw a photograph in *The Wall Street Journal* blog online [<http://blogs.wsj.com/photojournal/2010/05/14/pictures-of-the-week-may-9-%E2%80%93-may-14/>]. The caption that the world read was: “A Palestinian woman whose house has been occupied by Jewish settlers argued with Israelis who came to celebrate Jerusalem Day in the mainly Arab neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, East Jerusalem, Wednesday.” In the photo, the woman’s back is to the camera, while the settlers face her.

But you knew that the caption was wrong. You looked at those faces. You knew that the laughing faces were not of Israelis, but of modern Orthodox Jewish youngsters from the U.S., probably in yeshiva for their gap year. You may have even recognized some of them. You may know some of their parents. (I have learned that some of them are students at the Reishit Yerushalayim yeshiva for Americans in Beit Shemesh, and they are indeed on their gap year between high school and college.)

So my question to you is very simple. It is the same question that Rav Aharon Lichtenstein posed a quarter of a century ago,

when some of the best and brightest of Israeli religious Zionists were arrested as members of the violent Jewish underground. It was a title of an op-ed that Rav Aharon wrote for *Haaretz*:

“Where have we gone wrong?”

I remember how impressed I was by the question — then. For I thought that, finally, an acknowledged leader of modern Orthodoxy/religious Zionism recognized that deep hatred and racist attitudes towards the Arab had been allowed to fester in religious Zionist educational institutions. (Of course, racism and bigotry are not the exclusive properties of *modern* Orthodoxy. But the “in-your-face confidence” of the group of hooligans in this picture has religious Zionism written all over it.)

At first I was exhilarated by Rav Aharon’s *hakarot ha-het*, his recognition of the sin and its vicious consequences, and of the need to correct it. But time passed and nothing was done. Rav Aharon went back to his yeshiva, and every time some modern Orthodox Jew stunned the world with his indefensible actions — Baruch Goldstein, Yigal Amir — we were witness to the same hand-wringing among the moderates, as well as the old defense mechanisms: “Who are you to criticize?”, “We condemn their actions, but not their intentions”, “Look at the hatred and bigotry of Islamic fundamentalists.”

So let me tell you why your children — not all, but enough of them to get you worried — will continue to be in pictures like the one in *The Wall Street Journal*, or in movies like Max Blumenthal and Joseph Dana’s *Feeling the Hate in Jerusalem* [<http://maxblumenthal.com/feeling-the-hate-in-jerusalem/>]. Let me tell you why the bigotry will range from the not-so-genteel Islam-bashers that you find in every shul nowadays (when you were growing up, who knew from Islam?) to the “glatt kosher, *mehadrin*” bigots and hate-filled thugs in the picture.

The main source of Jewish hatred and bigotry against Arabs today comes from the Orthodox, and especially the modern Orthodox. This wasn’t always the case. The Orthodoxy that sprung from European soil absorbed the best of West civilization, culture and morality. The earlier generations of religious Zionists — Rav

The earlier generations of religious Zionists — Rav Reines, Rav Kook, Rav Soloveitchik — were European to the core. And the early generation of religious Zionists in America ... was ... deeply influenced by liberal American values and the American rejection of bigotry. Such moderates even convinced themselves that this was the message of the Torah. No more.

Reines, Rav Kook, Rav Soloveitchik — were European to the core. And the early generation of religious Zionists in America, though fed the prejudiced Zionist line about the Arabs, was nevertheless deeply influenced by liberal American values and the American rejection of bigotry. Such moderates even convinced themselves that this was the message of the Torah.

No more. The Israeli religious Zionism that has produced the settler movement is unaffected by universal moral values. I don't need to go into details here. You are familiar with their rabbis, you have read the articles and *parsha* sheets; you have recoiled at the message. Israeli religious Zionism today is insular, parochial, fundamentalist and deeply, deeply bigoted. I know many American Orthodox Jews who have come on aliyah, Jews with moderate principles, proud of American and universal moral values. They are terribly uncomfortable when their children return from the religious Zionist yeshivot and *ulpanot* as racist bigots who view the Arabs as animals and underlings, "hewers of wood and drawers of water."

Modern Orthodox educators in America should have worried less about the color of their children's hats and more about the color of their hearts. When they agonized over whether they would stay *frum*, they should have agonized over whether they would stay *mentshen*, humane individuals.

For modern Orthodoxy to reduce the likelihood of more pictures like the one in *The Wall Street Journal*, it should take the following steps:

1. Day schools should develop programs against prejudice, and I don't mean just prejudice against African Americans and Hispanics, though that is important too. I mean programs to counter bigotry against Arabs and Muslims. Appropriate sources can be found in Torah sources to give this a Jewish cast, and the illiberal sources can be explained away, as they were explained away by the 19th- and 20th-century European rabbis. One can start with Rav Abraham Kook's view that the land of Israel can be sold to Muslims because they are not idolaters.

2. Schools should invite Palestinian refugees to speak to students about their experiences. That would be a *kiddush ha-Shem*/sanctification of God's name in its own right, and the educational value would be enormous. I am not saying that equal time must be given to Palestinian spokesmen on the conflict. This is not about politics. It is about humanity and decency. Oscar Hammerstein wrote, "You've got to be taught to hate," but in a particularistic, religious atmosphere, and in the middle of a conflict, you have to be taught to respect. I realize that taking any time away from the curriculum for *tikun olam* is controversial, and trying to human-



"Make it known to your students that Maimonides was Islamic civilization's gift to the Jews." Statue commemorating Maimonides' life and work in Cordoba, Spain.

Photo: consumerfriendly/Flickr.com

ize Arabs will be even more so. After all, it is not as if when you look over your right shoulder, you see any less bigotry and racism. But choose not to and you will have more pictures like the *Journal's*. And what decent human *frum* Jew would want that?

3. American Muslims should come to the high schools and talk about their religion — or if that is too much for you, then find Jews, *frum* Jews, who will try to provide a positive portrait of Islam. It is easy to cherry-pick sources to portray another religion in an unflattering light. But that is where bigotry begins, and when it is "supported by the evidence" it gets harder to eradicate. Do to the Muslim sources what we do to the Jewish sources in day schools: accentuate the positive while explaining away the negative.

4. Modern Orthodoxy sees the Rambam/Maimonides as one of its great models. Make it known to your students that Maimonides was Islamic civilization's gift to the Jews. Without the Islamic environment, there could

have never been a Rambam. The influence of the golden age of Islamic civilization is written on every page of his works, and I mean his legal works as well as his philosophical ones. And, as you know, it is not just Rambam.

5. Don't romanticize the history of Jewish-Arab relations, but don't demonize it, either. Yes, there was Muslim discrimination against Jews, but it has been the *bon ton* of late to exaggerate it and to fail to understand the problems of any traditional religion dealing with other religions when it has political power. I wouldn't want to be a Christian living in the Land of Israel under a Jewish king because, according to Maimonides' law, that condemned them to death.

6. Always draw parallels from other people's bigotry to our own. Bigotry and xenophobia are universal phenomena. The same Jews who are revolted by what others have done to them should feel the same revulsion when they do it against others. Show zero tolerance for such bigotry.

7. Most important, give the proper preparation and training for students going to Israel in their gap year, a year with little supervision and with exposure to deeply racist and bigoted attitudes — all in the name of Torah. If they come back from Israel not wanting to talk to girls, you get nervous that they have fallen off the deep end. But what of their attitudes towards gentiles, especially Arabs? Aren't you worried about that?

It is not enough to ask, "Where have we gone wrong?" We have to take steps to stamp this out. Liberals, conservatives, Democrats, Republicans — all of us should work to eradicate the central illness with *frum* Judaism today: hate-filled bigotry. ✧

Daniel McCarthy

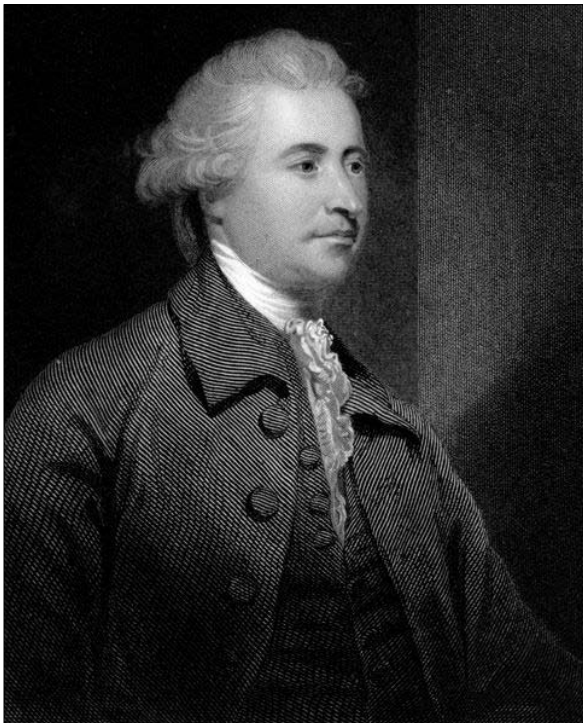
America's Best Hope For a Truly Thoughtful Conservatism

Daniel McCarthy is senior editor of The American Conservative magazine (www.amconmag.com).

FOR TWO YEARS NOW THE CLOSING OF THE CONSERVATIVE mind has been a hot topic in opinion magazines. Last year, Sam Tanenhaus pronounced “The Death of Conservatism” in *The New Republic*. This spring, the libertarian Cato Institute’s Julian Sanchez diagnosed the right as suffering from “epistemic closure,” a condition in which conservative pundits have become “untethered from reality as the impetus to satisfy the demand for red meat overtakes any motivation to report accurately.” Jim Manzi, a writer for *National Review*, found in talk-radio host Mark Levin’s book *Liberty and Tyranny* much evidence to support Sanchez’s contention. And many commentators saw in David Frum’s recent dismiss-

al from the American Enterprise Institute further proof of the right’s intellectual intolerance. (Frum had dared suggest that Republicans would pay a heavy price for their opposition to health care reform.)

Liberals have long thought of conservatives as the “stupid party.” In 1950 Lionel Trilling observed that “nowadays ... the conservative impulse and the reactionary impulse do not, with some isolated and some ecclesiastical exceptions, express themselves in ideas but only in action or in irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas.” Perhaps accounts of the right’s brain death are a misdiagnosis. Was the patient ever alive to begin with? Even the testimony of Manzi and Frum, stalwarts of the conservative movement, might be discounted. After all, it may be telling that they only began to argue that conservatives were losing their minds once a Democrat



Edmund Burke (left) and Alexis de Tocqueville (right): “They are keenly concerned with social stability, the rule of law, and moral and practical limits in economics and foreign policy. Their tradition is a fragile one with too few exponents, but it represents the best hope for a thoughtful conservatism that America has.”

Portraits: Wikimedia Commons

occupied the White House. In a Republican administration, they were happy for power to serve as a substitute for rigorous thought. It was Frum, after all, who minted the phrase “axis of evil,” a rubric with no geopolitical meaning but much demagogic value.

The demise of the intellectual right has nothing to do with the rise of Sarah Palin or talk radio; nor has it been brought about by the preoccupation that many grassroots Republicans have with Barack Obama’s birth certificate. Those are but new variations on old themes in American politics. What has most harmed the cause of thoughtful conservatism has been the collapse of the intellectual left.

Since the Great Depression the right has periodically been renewed by influxes of talent from the left. Some of the most striking polemicists battling the Franklin Roosevelt’s foreign and domestic policies in the 1930s were old individualist liberals who turned conservative in light of the rise of a more state-centered liberalism — Oswald Garrison Villard, once editor of *The Nation*, and John T. Flynn, a columnist for *The New Republic*, are just two examples. The brightest minds at *National Review* in its early days were those of ex-leftists Willmoore Kendall and James Burnham. (Whittaker Chambers, Frank Meyer, and Willi Schlamm belonged to a lower, but hardly less influential, rank.) In the 1960s and ’70s, neoconservatives who had once been Trotskyist fellow travelers or radicals of other descriptions imbued the right with some keen new insights — and not a few new blind spots, it must be said. All along there were libertarian economists like Ludwig von Mises and Milton Friedman and literary conservatives like Allan Tate and Russell Kirk. But much of conservatism’s analytic muscle was borrowed from the left.

It’s been a long time now since any left-wing intellectual of greater wattage than Christopher Hitchens or Paul Berman trekked rightward — and those two remain caricatures of a “tough” liberalism rather than bearing any resemblance to a thoughtful conservatism. What has stultified left and right alike is that progressive thinkers since the 1970s have deserted the battlefields of politics and economics for the playgrounds of culture and identity. Left and right alike have become depoliticized and have instead indulged in tribalisms of race and religion. The New Left withdrew to the academy it had once hoped to revolutionize and turned toward postmodernism. Ironically, some of the sharpest minds on the right in the 1970s and 1980s became fixated on the idea that the left was staging a successful march through the institutions of culture — when in fact the last radicals were in wholesale retreat from politics.

The New Right of the 1970s emulated the left. Where once conservatives and libertarians had prided themselves on their mastery of economic theory, the new breed of right-wing activist believed that taxes could always be cut and deficits didn’t matter. Foreign policy became a form of identity politics — an opportunity for asserting patriotism and Americanism against un-American liberals at home and enemies (as well as allies, if they happened to be French) abroad. As the left turned its attention to ever more specialized rights for ever narrower iden-

tity groups, the right reconceived itself as the partisan expression of a “silent” or “moral majority.” The trouble on both ends was that there’s no such thing as transgendered economics or Baptist foreign policy. Politics as the art of policy — rather the act of getting voters emotionally excited in order to win election — would now continue undisturbed by any principled, intelligent left or right. The result has been fiscal, monetary and foreign policies of remarkable consistency under the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations.

The serious intellectual right has been fragmented by this development, even as the merely partisan right has consolidated. Libertarians continue to generate provocative and highly articulate ideas, not only in economics but in opposition to a bipartisan imperial foreign policy and encroachments upon civil liberties. Congressman Ron Paul has reinvigorated this branch of the right, and in doing so has brought the scholarship of organizations such as the Ludwig von Mises Institute and the Independent Institute to a much wider audience. The trouble with libertarianism, however, is that while it offers carefully articulated approaches to economics and some kinds of moral philosophy, it provides little insight into the workings of power and of politics per se.

A second outpost of intelligent life on the right does understand power, perhaps all too well. This is the realist school in foreign policy. Scholars such as John Mearsheimer, Christopher Layne, and Andrew Bacevich — not all of whom would call themselves conservatives — have devised remarkable critiques of the failings of U.S. foreign policy. But these thinkers are so far apart from the flag-waving identity politics of the Republican right (and its print and broadcast media camp followers) that their direct influence over policymakers — and hence policy — is limited. Moreover, while their theories attempt to take into account both state power and economics, they are often skeptical of philosophical systems that attempt to go beyond such material concerns.

Finally, there is a small cluster of conservative thinkers who are philosophical as well as political and humane as well as right of center. They understand that peace must be a constituent element in conservatism—for nothing is less conservative of the social order than the upheavals of war. These thinkers might be called the “constitutional conservatives,” and they include scholars such as Claes Ryn of the Catholic University of America, author of a key investigation into the nature of today’s imperialism called *America the Virtuous*, and George Carey of Georgetown University, whose works include the essay collection *In Defense of the Constitution*. Thinkers in this tradition frequently draw upon the sociopolitical ideas not only of such august figures as Edmund Burke, the Founding Fathers, and Alexis de Tocqueville, but more modern writers such as Bertrand de Jouvenel and Robert Nisbet. They are keenly concerned with social stability, the rule of law, and moral and practical limits in economics and foreign policy. Their tradition is a fragile one with too few exponents, but it represents the best hope for a thoughtful conservatism that America has. ☆

The Gaza Blockade

On May 31, Israel Defense Forces naval ships interdicted a flotilla of vessels intending to run Israel's sea blockade of Gaza. Nine persons aboard the vessels died, and a score or more of others were wounded, including members of the Israeli boarding parties. In response to the action, the Israeli peace organization Gush Shalom issued the following statement in the form of a full-page ad in the June 1 issue of Haaretz:

A CRIME AGAINST ISRAEL

What happened yesterday is a crime. A crime against the State of Israel.

A band of foolhardy, irresponsible and power-drunk persons decided on an action that was bound to result in people being killed and injured.

No sensible person in Israel or abroad will buy the collection of lies and pretexts with which those responsible are trying to justify themselves. The more so since no one of the victims has been allowed to speak.

Not only was this operation immoral, but it is also turning against us the last of our sympathizers in the world and adding strength to those who call for a boycott on Israel.

There is only one way to limit the damage:

— TO CALL for the immediate appointment of an international board of inquiry to investigate the event.

— TO LIFT at once the immoral and illegal blockade against the million and a half inhabitants of the Gaza Strip.

— TO IMPLEMENT the proposed prisoner exchange and free Gilad Shalit.

Huge damage has been done. We must try to repair it as best as possible.

GUSH SHALOM

Earlier this month, The Associated Press reported that Ireland's Prime Minister Brian Cowen had urged Israel to allow the Rachel Corrie, a private vessel registered in Ireland, to deliver a shipment of medical supplies and concrete to Gaza. Among 11 passengers and 8 crew aboard the vessel was Mairead Corrigan, a 1976 Nobel Peace Prize winner from Northern Ireland. The ship is named for an American college student who died when crushed by an Israel Defense Forces bulldozer while protesting house demolitions in Gaza. After being detained by mechanical problems off Libya's coast, the Rachel Corrie set sail on June 5, and was intercepted by Israeli commandos in international waters. Passengers and crew surrendered peacefully, and were ordered deported from Israel.



Photo: freegaza.org/Flickr.com

David Bromwich

Obama as President

A Question of Character

David Bromwich is Sterling Professor of English at Yale University. This article appeared originally in the London Review of Books [www.lrb.co.uk].

ON SUNDAY, MARCH 21, THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF Representatives passed a health care bill that had been promoted for a year and brokered in many particulars by Barack Obama. This marked a victory for a substantial piece of social legislation, the first of its kind in more than three decades; and the result appears to have given the president and his party fresh confidence in their efforts at comprehensive reform. Whatever may happen now, it was plain the defeat of health care would have been a death-blow to the Obama presidency; its passage has given him time to discover the means for a renewal of presidential energy. Yet the bill passed without a single Republican vote, and its revisions, augmentations and delays, many of them prompted by Obama in a vain search for bipartisan

support, made the process a textbook example of “winning ugly.” When the president launched his proposal last spring, two-thirds of Americans approved the idea of national health care. By the time it passed the number had shrunk to a third.

To recruit votes from his own party, Obama surrendered much of his prestige by making concessions to senators from Louisiana and Nebraska, and arranging a tax exemption for unions that sponsor high-cost insurance plans for members. His claim to transcend the corruption of “business as usual in Washington” was in this way nullified by his practice of the usual arts of political adaptation. Those compromises are

remembered daily on right-wing radio. All the vehemence and animosity of the anti-Obama movement is concentrated now on handing him a defeat in this year’s midterm elections. Don’t do anything rash to jeopardize *our* victory — that is what the radio hosts say. (The Tea Party crowd, with their antitax, antidebt, antigovernment views, are regarded sympathetically by something between 20 per cent and 30 per cent of the voters; they know they are less than a groundswell but



President Obama greets cadets following a speech at West Point Military Academy. “There’s something weird ... about the way when you talk to people about Obama, they mention his speeches and compare them to his other speeches. ... They talk about what he says and compare it what he says.”

more than a splinter group.) There have been violent exceptions to the rule of self-restraint. On February 18 a wild man who hated taxes flew a single-engine plane into a federal building in Austin, Texas; a group of Tea Partiers mobbed the Democrats on the Capitol steps after the health care vote and shouted epithets at the lawmakers; and on April 19 gun-rights fanatics carried their weapons to a rally at Fort Hunt National Park near Alexandria, Virginia. But the tone of the anti-Obama protests has calmed down. The radio hosts now constantly remind their listeners

that the sweetest vindication will come at the ballot box in November.

The results of off-year elections seem to bear out that hope. On November 3, 2009, Bob McDonnell, a Republican, was elected governor of Virginia; on January 19, a Republican who describes himself an independent, Scott Brown, won Ted Kennedy’s Senate seat in Massachusetts. The scale of their victories were particularly ominous. McDonnell took 59 per cent of the votes and Brown 52 per cent, in states where Obama a year earlier had pulled 53 per cent and 62 per cent, respectively. Interviews suggested that these contests were interpreted by

voters above all as referenda on the Obama presidency.

The first bank bailout had of course been engineered by Bush, and cost three-quarters of a trillion dollars, but the subsequent bailout and the stimulus package, which have taken federal spending on the financial collapse far into the trillions, are held against Obama. Likewise the government takeover of Chrysler and General Motors and the early proposal for an emissions-trading (“cap-and-trade”) energy program overseen by the government. Finally, there was the anger accruing over a year against the health care plan itself.

The idea that the nation is becoming insolvent has spread very widely, and nothing Obama has said, no testimony from the experts he calls to his side, has begun to quell the popular fear. Yet two-thirds of the Tea Partiers support both Social Security and Medicare. Why Obama’s people did not choose to call “Medicare for Everyone” remains a mystery. Anyway, the damage from a long series of policy redesigns on the way to his victory has not yet been repaired. The length of the process and the suspicion drawn by the changes gave his enemies plenty of time to gather strength. These would seem to be the leading lessons of his costly triumph on health care.

Yet when Obama initiated a second campaign for energy reform under the rubric of cap-and-trade, he seemed to look back on the way the health care bill was managed as a blueprint for successful lawmaking in the future. So with cap-and-trade, he once more started out with pre-emptive concessions. He brought in the nuclear industry by announcing a plan to permit the building of a new generation of reactors. The right to offshore oil drilling, which Democrats had held back for eight years under George W. Bush, was granted by Obama without a word of contest. The coal industry, too, doubtless will be accommodated as a prelude to cap-and-trade bargaining, but the recent mining disaster in West Virginia has rendered an early statement inadvisable.

One again, Obama is choosing to leave behind the popular base of the Democratic Party and build an ecumenical consensus which starts in his head. The process seems to be intuitive, and to explain it one can only fall back on psychology. Obama sees himself as the “establishment” president. If a populist insurgency on the right presses hard against his legitimacy, if disappointed supporters stop giving money or knocking on doors, still he has the confidence of a leader whose standing is buoyed up by corporate leaders, by a famous general and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, by a decent preponderance of Wall Street, and by the mainstream media, whose resources he deploys and channels with a relentlessness no other president has approached. Barack Obama, in the first 392 days of his presidency, put himself on public view for photographs, interviews, ceremonies or mingling with the public in one way or another on all but 27 days. He gave more interviews in his first year than Bill Clinton and George W. Bush combined.

“I know both those guys; they are very savvy businessmen.” One can’t imagine Franklin Roosevelt or John Kennedy saying such a thing, or wanting to say it.

His approval rating, which stood at 70 per cent a year ago, now hovers around 45 per cent, but it is possible for a president of doubtful popularity to win reelection if the mainstream

voices rally to his side and the opposition lacks credible talent. Many people who voted for Obama in 2008 were voting against McCain and Palin. The same people are capable of voting that way again.

Obama’s calculations, then, are plausible and may pay off; yet he has made mistakes nobody would have predicted. The truth is that he did not come into office a fully equipped politician. He was new to the national elite and enjoyed his membership palpably. This came out in debates and town meetings where he often mentioned that the profits from his books had lodged him in the highest tax bracket. It would emerge later in his comment to Lloyd Blankfein and Jamie Dimon, the CEOs of Goldman Sachs and J.P. Morgan: “I know both those guys; they are very savvy businessmen.” One can’t imagine Franklin Roosevelt or John Kennedy saying such a thing, or wanting to say it. They had known “those guys” all their lives and felt no tingle of reflected glory. Obama has not yet recognized that conspicuous relish of his place among the elite does him two kinds of harm: it spurs resentment in people lower down the ladder, and it diminishes his stature among the grandees by showing that he needs them.

John Heilemann and Mark Halperin, in their absorbing history of the 2008 campaign, *Race of a Lifetime*, speak of Obama’s “million-dollar smile.” It is indeed a great asset. His voice has proved not so sure a thing. It alters obviously and with discernible intent according to its audience: taking on King-like overtones for a crowd of African Americans; dropping the terminal “g” and dipping into homey cadences (“What we’re tryin’ to do”) in the Midwest; massively sober in speeches to Congress but relaxed in town-hall meetings (with reliance on the word “folks”). The conscious Obama *heft*, audible everywhere, is something one either likes or doesn’t — on the order of Ronald Reagan’s genial roll of the head. On the other hand, the lack of humor can’t easily be converted to an advantage.

A spontaneous ability to laugh at oneself or to make a witty remark that doesn’t wound is always appreciated in a politician, but it has not been given to Obama. His self-deprecation is stiff and rehearsed, and his cutting comments always sting. His equability in interviews has partly concealed this defect from an admiring press; the radio shock-jocks make more of it, and dwell on his superior airs. When Obama feels edgy or tired, his manner turns condescending and priggish. It is at just such moments that he seems most heartily one of the elite. His saying to Hillary Clinton in an early debate when she called Obama likeable, “You’re likeable *enough*, Hillary,” was an early example of the propensity. He did it again in the health care summit when John McCain was making heavy

weather of the campaign promises Obama hadn't kept, and Obama, where no response was necessary, chose to say, "Let me just make this point, John, because we're not campaigning anymore: the election's over." Before the putdown McCain had looked small and confused — there was a beaten man. An oddly unpleasant schoolmasterish moment.

Obama's besetting political fault is his automatic adoption of the tone of command, accompanied by a persistent reluctance to be seen as the source of the policy he commandeers. This especially marks his leadership of his party; and his precociousness has worked against him here. Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of the House, adores Obama, and at public events can be seen to bestow on him the melting look of a senior sponsor for a protégé who has fulfilled every hope. Harry Reid, the Senate majority leader — who is widely blamed for the mismanagement of health care but who likely took a hit for many wrong calls by the White House — was another early admirer. He noticed how bored Obama was in the Senate, and told him to run for president. When he won in 2008, Obama went to the head of the class, above the reach of pragmatic advice from people who could have taught him some things. They could have taught him, for one thing, that the Republicans of these years are not playable and will not "come around."

The American establishment as a whole, rather than the leaders of a party, became Obama's tutor in statesmanship. It was not an adequate substitute. When he entered the presidency, Obama had seen more of the world than most people but less of America than many Americans. What he knew were the academic, liberal-political and the corporate milieus, where doors swung open in gratitude and wonder at a man of his qualities. Fellow students at Harvard Law School and colleagues at the University of Chicago Law School knew him as a "mediator" without marked opinions of his own. He left almost no trail of position papers — nothing substantial, quotable or quoted — though he cast votes and made decisions after listening to others make their case. He led a charmed life and aroused few suspicions. Two decades of ambitious but unadventurous apprenticeship on this pattern left him baffled at the first strong signs of resistance in 2009. Until that year, it is only a slight exaggeration to say the Republicans whom Obama had met were judges, lawyers, corporate leaders and academics. He had never encountered a determined man in the black hat quite like John Boehner, the Congressional minority leader; as for Fox Radio, it was a distant island, heard of in chuckling rumors at dinner parties, its noises dissipated by the ocean of seminars and think-tanks in between. Obama is still mystified by the idea that there are people who don't like him.

His sense of personal responsibility was always accompanied by extreme cautiousness. Many people think this has served him well in a time of crisis. I don't agree. I wish Obama had acted more boldly, and think he could have done so. The

large majority who admired him a month into his taking of office included people disgusted by two wars, the Cheney-Bush encroachment on civil liberties, and the scale of the support being requested from taxpayers for the banks and brokerage houses. The war party and "banksters," as they are now called, were discredited; the time was ripe for a change and Obama had run with the idea that he would be its executor. It was a moment in foreign policy to pull back from militarism, and in domestic policy to create jobs and reroute the economy without following the advice of those who had ruined it. There were opportunities for reform of a sort that comes less often than once in a generation. Yet Obama acted on the assumption that the establishment is one and irreplaceable, and must be served in roughly its present form. This assumption

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he seems to have acquired between the summer of 2008 — the time of his capitulation on domestic surveillance and his AIPAC speech affirming support for Israel — and the National Archives speech on security a year later. The trajectory was completed by the sacking last November of Greg Craig as White House counsel: Craig was

the lawyer who drafted Obama's original plan for the closing of Guantanamo.

If one to compile an Obama Retreat Checklist — composed of the advisors whom he cut away when under pressure, or persons he nominated to important posts but withdrew from consideration — the names would include Zbigniew Brzezinski, Robert Malley, Rashid Khalidi and the antiwar Republican Senator Chuck Hagel, whose leaked note to George W. Bush may have saved the U.S. from a war with Iran in 2007. If one made a list of incidents as well of persons, one would have to count the snub to Jimmy Carter that denied him a prominent part at the Democratic convention of 2008 — a graceless as well as gutless omission. By contrast, the delay in the closing of Guantanamo might be supposed an effect of sheer miscalculation, except that it so plainly falls in with the Obama style.

Obama is unique among politicians in running out the clock where there are many minutes left on it and he is not ahead. He did that on Guantanamo. He did it with Israel-Palestine when he required a settlement freeze and then assumed, if he waited long enough, Netanyahu would grow amenable. He did it and is still doing it with Iran, where U.S. policy remains in suspension: between the preference of Robert Gates and Admiral Mullen for a strategy of containment, by which Iran would give up nuclear weapons research in return for a guarantee of regional security; and the counterpressure from Dennis Ross, the antenna and prod of the Israel lobby within the White House, urging a series of tripwires by which sanctions would be followed by crippling sanctions and the failure of the latter would argue the necessity of bombing.

In Afghanistan and Iraq, Obama seemed to prefer disengagement from war as soon as possible. But thus far he has

shifted the burden rather than changed the pattern; the active war is now Afghanistan, with extensive deployment of Predator drones for assassinations in Pakistan also. Meanwhile he has held on to the Bush protection of state secrets to counter lawsuits that accuse the U.S. of torture. He has supported the Cheney-Bush violations of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act. He has vowed to keep certain Guantanamo prisoners in indefinite detention under an emergency war provision still to be drafted. He has given reassurance to the lawyers from the Office of the Vice President and the Office of Legal Counsel under Bush that he does not intend to hold them accountable for the “torture memos” that broke America’s treaty obligations. He has claimed a new presidential power to assassinate an American citizen on foreign soil, without due process or oversight, when the citizen is accused of inciting violence against America. Finally, he has chosen to drop his nomination of a libertarian lawyer, Dawn Johnsen, to head the Office of Legal Counsel — a lawyer who would surely have disapproved the policy of placing the torture lawyers beyond accountability and discountenanced the idea that a president can authorize the assassination of an American citizen.

Many people continue to feel certain relief at having Obama as their president and I can’t deny sharing that feeling. It springs from the possibility that after eight years of catastrophe we have a leader who at least is capable of understanding the size and nature of the problems he confronts. The change of feelings is a fact, if only a psychological fact, and it exists elsewhere in the world. But it corresponds to actual changes. On April 8, the Muslim religious reformer Tariq Ramadan spoke at Cooper Union in New York City and, on an occasion that was part colloquium and part debate, a crowd of curious were permitted to hear a leading moderate voice of world Islam. This would not have been possible under Cheney and Bush: Ramadan’s visa had been revoked by the State Department in 2004, and it took the leadership of Hillary Clinton to reverse the ban. Whatever speed Obama works at, this is the sort of opening that seems possible in his presidency.

Though one may regret the temperament that moves him in the direction of preemptive concession, one has to be aware of the obstacles he faces on many sides. A reminder appeared again in the recent controversy over Israel’s announcement that it intended to build 1,600 colonizing units in East Jerusalem. That the plan was declared with impolitic brazenness, in the middle of a state visit by Vice President Joseph Biden, enabled Obama to establish vividly his differences with Netanyahu. Here, after a year of delays, with considerable craft, the president marched behind not only the vice president but a statement by the most famous American general, David Petraeus, in testimony before Congress. Petraeus said that the unsolved question of Palestine was the largest “root” danger

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to American security at home and abroad. For resistance to Netanyahu, President Obama has been assailed in an open letter by Ronald Lauder, president of the World Jewish Congress; an open letter by Elie Wiesel, and a Senate petition got up by AIPAC and signed by 76 senators, 38 of them Democrats.

The opposition to Obama’s policies within America has probably not yet peaked. The consistent project of the Republican Party since 1970 has been the southernization of American politics; and those who deplore the Democrats for ending segregation in the South are apt to admire the Israelis for trying to maintain it in their fashion. Lyndon Johnson said as he signed the civil rights bill on July 2, 1964, “We have lost the South for a generation.” It has been two generations now and there is no sign of the South returning. Political control of the region has reverted to the party of Abraham Lincoln; and that party in 2010 is heavily involved in the celebration of Confederate History Month. The new orthodoxy of the Republican South holds that the Civil War was not about slavery so much as about “economic disagreements.”

This extrusion from the ideology of the modern-day Republican Party of the sentiment of constitutional equality — the right of equal treatment under the law, and the justice, as Lincoln put it, of lifting the “artificial weights from all shoulders” — must be accounted one of the strangest twists in all of American history. Yet Lincoln himself noticed something like it in the reversion, by the first Americans to call themselves Democrats, from the libertarian party of Jefferson to the party of territorial expansion and property rights under Andrew Jackson and Stephen Douglas; while the Whig Party, once associated with John Adams, under the new name of Republican, extended the cause of liberty beyond the right of property. “I remember,” Lincoln wrote in 1859, “once being amused at seeing two partially intoxicated men engage in a fight with their greatcoats on, which fight, after a long, and rather harmless contest, ended in each having fought himself *out* of his own coat, and *into* that of the other. If the two leading parties of this day are really identical with the two in the days of Jefferson and Adams, they have performed the same feat as the two drunken men.”

John Boehner was far into the sleeves of his new greatcoat when he bellowed his “Hell, no!” rejection speech against Obama’s health care bill to close the Republican side of the congressional debate. Boehner — a capable speaker, a callous man, and a politician who treads the brink of disorder — was using the voice and words one would use to harangue a crowd to string up a wretch the sheriff was holding. A step down in class, for a national politician, but akin to the shout “You lie!” to the president on the floor of Congress last September.

Probably racism was a necessary but not a sufficient cause for the launching of the Tea Party movement. The organized right-wing crowd, who Obama is tempted to ignore but who will certainly play a part in the next two elections, are not ap-

peasable in the mass. Yet some of its members can be reached (some of them voted for him). What, then, could he say to them? It is curious that one asks the question in that way, rather than, for example: "What should he do?" But an odd thing about Obama's presidency has been the extent to which his speeches are taken to be the site of the real action.

"There's something weird," a close observer of politics said the other day, "about the way when you talk to people about Obama, they mention his speeches and compare them to his other speeches. 'Oh, it's like that great moment in the race speech.' Or: 'The West Point speech was a disappointment but he really recouped it in the Nobel Prize speech.' They talk about what he says and compare it what he says."

A species of aesthetic judgment has never been allowed to supplant political judgment in quite this way for any previous president. Obama must be aware of the unearned allowance, widely evident in the respectable media, and it can only encourage a false belief that his words are the moral equivalent of actions, as the words of other politicians somehow are not.

Off-script, Obama speaks so deliberately — with such compunction lest a misjudged word escape — that he seems a lucid expositor of sentiments and intentions. Yet he lacks the ad-lib style of the born politician, skill at making the explanation that he actually explains. He has not yet given an entire speech that unfolds a coherent policy in any area of governance; and all of his speeches bear the impress of his belief in the transparent soundness of his own position. He talks as if by full certification of the relevant establishment — corporate, financial, military, medical — and he never takes the trouble to imagine a strong opponent. He is, by nature, a man of tendencies rather than commitments.

He would like things to improve for everyone, even for the rich, but especially for the poor because they need it. Yet he shuns the language of economic equality. He is a Fabian non-socialist. Libertarians are right to see him as an outsize admirer of legitimate authority who relies on state power far

too much and too implicitly. This is the assumption guiding his increased use of Predator and Reaper drone surveillance and the robot-killings by Hellfire missiles. He tends to dislike war and would prefer to wind down the military action in Afghanistan. But it would take more than a tendency; it would demand a commitment for a president to say at this moment: We can no longer live beyond our political, financial and psychological means; we can't have multiple wars abroad and taxes that subsidize them on the backs of future generations, and rising debts and deficits, and all the while maintain our constitutional integrity.

A single-minded leader, one who planted himself in convictions more definite than tendencies, would use the word "empire" often in a neutral and nonendorsing manner. He would make Americans wary of it as an unpleasant fact. And while acknowledging the necessity of this or that measure of emergency defense, he would convey the burden of the unloading of billions of dollars that renders the maintenance of empire untenable. This is a work of persuasion Obama has not come close to beginning. Yet he has made interesting promises that are being loosely watched. If he can keep one or two — say, regarding nuclear proliferation and Palestine — he may gain a credit that widens other possibilities. That is the hope that many cherish already from health care.

Meanwhile, agents are working against him at home, sometimes in collaboration with others abroad, and their impact will be felt in the nomination of candidates for office, in elections and election tactics, on billboards and radio sound bites. To push through even one more victory on the order of health care, Obama will have to give up the posture of mediator that comes naturally to him. He will have to admit in his political practice that there are parties; that he is the leader of a party; that there is a worse and a better cause; and that it feels like a fight because it really is a fight. This does not mean just the adoption of a new set of tactics. It will require almost the emergence of a new character. ☆

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